

THE MINIMALIST TOUCH: RAYMOND CARVER

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Abstract

This article looks at one of the most interesting aspects related to Raymond Carver's minimalist short fiction, i.e. the creative and philosophic transformation it undergoes. To that purpose, we analyze a number of early stories and compare them to revised versions and/or later stories in order to show how Carver moves through revision to solution.

Keywords: minimalism, short fiction, language, re-vision, Carver

Introduction

Carver's "real America" is "*a netherland of work-place, home, and shopping centers*" (Shute, 1987:121) in which the larger community seems simply not to exist. Small wonder that understanding of the self and others is limited, communication negligible or, worse, mere "human noise".

Although there is evidence of a genuinely loving domesticity and a solid middle-class lifestyle in "*The Bath*" (1981), the characters of this masterwork of Carver's early aesthetic: "*Get in, get out. Don't linger. Go on*" ("*Fires*" 1989:13), are nonetheless typical of his "down-and-outers". They are people on the verge, totems, faceless, nearly nameless emblems of a class. Two thirds of the way through the story, and then almost grudgingly, we are finally given a name for the family - Weiss. And while the mother's Christian name does manage to slip out in conversation, we are never told the father's. As the tale progresses towards its final horror, we witness growing confusion, an increasing inability to define and name, plus the typical tendency to end "*with a sententious ambiguity that leaves the reader holding the bag*" (Gearhart, 1996:444).

However successful "*The Bath*" may be on its own minimalist terms (equanimity of surface, 'ordinary' subjects, recalcitrant narrators, slightness of story, characters who don't think out loud, attenuated language, pared of ornamentation and intentional ambiguity, "*intentional poverty and anorexia of style*" {Gorra,

1984:156} mimetic of the spiritual poverty of the characters), Carver felt it was in clear need of being enhanced, redrawn, re-imagined.

In its new version, titled "*A Small, Good Thing*" (1983), the same "obsessions" are transfigured, mediated and tempered by genuine compassion. Carver's "submerged population", to use Frank O'Connor's phrase, begins to surface, moving out from the preoccupations of self to become aware of and even feel kinship to the larger community. As one would expect, the introduction of compassion into Carver's world proves to be a mixed blessing. While this new-found empathy considerably deepens the emotional scope of the characters, it also brings into their now less marginal lives a greater share of pain. Still, if empathy pains, it also transfigures, creating a slight possibility of salvation. Once the imagination succeeds, as the mother's in the story has, in breaking through the crust of self toward an honest realisation of others (as in Crane's "*The Open Boat*"), a host of options and possibilities suddenly arises.

The language of re-vision

This process of personal redemption begins with the word. Their despairing, blue-collar mediocrity aside, if Carver's protagonists have anything in common, it is their stunning inarticulateness. In "*The Bath*" (1981), this is exemplified by the baker's elliptical calls, by the physicians' inability to name the boy's condition, by perhaps even the narrator himself who, thoroughly effaced in Carver's stories, often flounders with the simplest words, describing, for example, a 'gurney' (properly named in the later version) as "a thing like a bed ... a thing with wheels" (p. 28).

In "*A Small, Good Thing*" poverty of language diminishes. With the artful exception of the baker, every major character is now named, an act which signals a critical turn in Carver's work, for by creating a world in which things can be named – explored and objectified by the communal activity of language – Carver allows and, in fact, demands of his characters a truer engagement. The characteristic struggle is now one between impassivity and responsiveness, apathy and concern, staying cool and risking vulnerability, between the appeal and danger of moral indifference and commitment.

While the earlier story, with its image of ritual cleansing, hinges upon the despair of a guilt which cannot be washed away, a grief that stands no chance of utterance and resolution, the revised version strives for something better, a new covenant between the players: the chance for release in the telling, and, if not salvation through communion, at least a clear sign about which direction to now pursue. The act of articulation is not, in and of itself, a remedy for the grief and uncertainty to which Carver's characters are heirs; still, the word, honestly uttered, constitutes a beginning, some place from which to start.

In two of his late stories – “*Feathers*” and “*Cathedral*” – Raymond Carver clearly appears to have changed his estimation of the potential power in his characters, the power to reconstruct their lives through language, and, in the process, arrive at some understanding or intuitive accord.

Unlike earlier Carver protagonists, i.e. the inhabitants of “*Hopelessville*” (Stull, 1985:53), these narrators show an uncommon interest in the way they tell their stories. The stories themselves dramatize the characters' incipient awareness of their own authority: the control of their own language. This act of assertion reveals their ability to read, at last, the text of their own life. They “read” in the sense of an intimate interaction with the fabric of their memories, fears, and desires and the “text” resulting from this practice resists the characters' tendency to fall passively silent. The nihilism that Carver has been accused of is successfully deflected by these two narrators: through language, through the engaged imaginative act of “telling”, they are granted a new vision of their lives and, in the process, a re-vision of meaning.

Critics of Carver's early work never cease to highlight the extreme economy to which he submits both himself and his imagined world. This restricted, minimalist aesthetic seems either to impress or discourage, according to how the reader interprets the implied struggle for power. James Atlas (1981), for instance, notes that for all the “talk” in the stories, it is “*groping, rudimentary*. [These characters] *have no wisdom to purvey ... Language becomes just another misfortune, without our ever quite knowing why. In his early stories the obsessive subject is the failure of human dialogue*” (p. 96).

In his essay “*On Writing*” (1989), Carver dwells upon the necessary element of control in language:

“If the words are heavy with the writer's own unbridled emotions, or if they are imprecise or inaccurate for some other reason – if the words are in any way blurred – the reader's eyes will slide right over them and nothing will be achieved. The reader's own artistic sense will simply not be engaged” (Fires, 1989:16).

Blurred language and bridled emotions

Language, Carver seems to be saying, is both an obstacle and the means of confronting that obstacle. He acknowledges the duplicity of words while asserting in the same breath that the writer fights against this liability, that emotions must be “bridled”. He fights for the vision of the reader. If the reader's eyes “slide right over” the “blurred” language, the reader does not in reality see it and so cannot *re-vise* it through his “artistic sense”, cannot re-write it.

In “*Feathers*” (1983) and “*Cathedral*” (1983) the author allows characters to discover this “artistic sense” within themselves, and they begin to “read” for the first time. At this stage, an earlier story might serve as a counterpoint. The story we have in mind, “*What We Talk About ...*” (1981), speaks less of love than of the inadequacy of language to convey those abstractions springing from “*unbridled emotions*”. Even the title suggests a practice of displacement. The attempt to talk about love results in story, but the stories in this case are struggles that fail to elicit their audiences’ “artistic sense”. As Mel the cardiologist, one of the characters, says, “*I’ll tell you what real love is ... I mean, I’ll give you a good example. And you can draw your own conclusions*” (p. 144). Like the writer posited by Carver, Mel assumes that language must catalyze a process, but, as the story illustrates, he senses also the inadequacy of his role in that process. All his efforts to explain the meaning of his parables end in questions or just inconclusive silence. We see the breakdown of response in Nick’s final utterance: “*I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone’s heart. I could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark*” (p. 154). This scene could be read as a moment of communion in which the story culminates but for the presence of that “*human noise*”. What better description of “*blurred*” language and what more apt rendition of a scene in which nothing will be achieved than the stasis and darkness that blot out this story at its end, leaving literally nothing for the “*eye*” to rest upon?

Speaking of the self-conscious labour that went into the stories of this volume, Carver resorts to the terminology of ‘struggle’: “*I pushed and pulled and worked with those stories before they went into the book to an extent I’d never done with any other stories. When the book was put together ... I didn’t write anything at all for six months. And then the first story I wrote was “Cathedral”, which I feel is totally different in conception and execution from any stories that have come before ... There was an opening up when I wrote that story*” (Fires, p. 204).

Such language is significant, as the ‘pushing’, ‘pulling’, and ‘working’ result in an “opening up”. Escape into freedom mirrors the writer’s paradigm. A condition of being “bridled” will result in words that engage, or open up to, the reader’s “artistic sense”. If this metaphor encompasses the artistic process, then “*Feathers*” and “*Cathedral*”, both results of Carver’s changed practice, could also manifest that practice. A rare enough phenomenon for characters in the Carver world before, the liberation of creativity becomes the redemptive act in the later stories. Creation is the only act with meaning because it generates its own, and in the narrators of these two stories we find characters concerned to an unprecedented degree with reading and drawing accurately from the texts of their lives. Still, both are but nascent artists, and neither story affords any guarantees that the evolution will continue, but possibility is verified as each consciousness shows itself ready to grasp and wrest interpretation from the world rather than simply process it.

The characters of the early Carver are quarantined not only in their physical and emotional selves, but in time as well. "*Carver is the consummate master of NOW. There are no getaways of hope allowed into the future or back into the past,*" says Herzinger (1985:9). Narrative, however, means that the past is recoverable. It acts as a "getaway of hope" into the future by re-vising the past. In this regard, "*Feathers*" (1983) provides an interesting example. While Jack, the narrator, recalls an evening spent with a friend and his wife, it is the backward and forward motion through time that grants his memory its significance. He faces the past by imposing upon it his imaginative reconstruction, and by means of this re-vision finds some solace for the future. Jack's story - his re-vising of the past - becomes a sort of weapon to combat feelings of powerlessness. In the process Jack encounters the limits of his expressive resources, but the value in his story lies in his struggle with those limits. He acts rather than accept the confusion that has shrouded his failed marriage. The recurring question "*What's to say?*" is answered by the story itself.

Jack's approach to his text is emotional, structured by a stream of associations. The opening paragraph – with its seemingly random collocations, advanced by the choppy cadences of speech – reveals a consciousness gradually challenging itself: "*This friend of mine from work, Bud, he asked Fran and me to supper. I didn't know his wife and he didn't know Fran. But Bud and I were friends. And I knew there was a little baby at Bud's house. That baby must have been eight months old when Bud asked us to supper. Where'd those eight months go? Hell, where's the time gone since? I remember the day Bud came to work with a box of cigars. Dutch Masters. But each cigar had a red sticker on it and a wrapper that said IT'S A BOY! I didn't smoke cigars, but I took one anyway. "Take a couple," Bud said. He shook the box. "I don't like cigars either. This is her idea." He was talking about his wife, Olla*" (p. 3).

This passage proceeds by associative strands, broken by a pair of questions. But these questions are not merely ruptures; they spark the telling of the story altogether, challenging Jack's attempts to recover time and redeem the present by reading his past accurately. The aggregate of details must be sorted through for Jack to arrive at, or select, his significant moments. He has trouble remembering Bud's wife's name, even as he recalls their baby, but by an inductive sequence, returning to the day the child was born, he triggers the memory of her name, the last word of the paragraph: Olla. This psychological process is the "opening up" Carver speaks of in connection with these stories. The freedom and assertiveness of this passage, something we usually take for granted in fiction, is new, unheard of before, in the realm of Carver's own work.

However, as the narrative progresses, clearly it is less a series of challenges to Jack's power of recall than to his powers of rendition. Throughout the visit to Bud and Olla's, Jack and Fran encounter sights that surprise, dismay, and enthrall them.

In his memory the veil of a strange beauty settles over all of these things so that his recollection then demands embellishment, even the crude sort of which Jack is capable. He is faced with spanning that gap between experience and re-vision, as in the passage describing the couple's arrival and their greeting by Bud's peacock, Joey:

"The bird moved forward a little. Then it turned its head to the side and braced itself. It kept its bright, wild eye right on us. Its tail was raised, and it was like a big fan folding in and out. There was every color in the rainbow shining from that tail. "My God," Fran said quietly. She moved her hand over to my knee. "Goddamn," I said. There was nothing more to say. The bird made this strange wailing sound once more. [...] If it'd been something I was hearing late at night and for the first time, I'd have thought it was somebody dying or else something wild and dangerous" (p. 8).

Initially, nothing in Jack's description seems other than mundane, his lack of verbal resources revealed in the clichés he resorts to - *"like a big fan"* and *"every color of the rainbow"*. He can only curse because *"there was nothing more to say"*. But this statement reports his reaction *then*. To Fran (his wife) he said nothing more, but as he tells his story later, he can say more, something more truthful, suggesting both fear and attraction.

Further challenges lie in store, as when Olla finally brings baby Harold into the gathering. The appearance of Harold leaves both Fran and Jack gasping. The moment is humorous, but primarily because Jack again confronts a sight defying description, and his attempts to encompass Harold's ugliness grow into awkward, hyperbolic repetition:

"... it was the ugliest baby I'd ever seen. It was so ugly I couldn't say anything. No words would come out of my mouth. I don't mean it was diseased or disfigured. Nothing like that. It was just ugly. It had a big red face, pop eyes, a broad forehead, and these big fat lips. It had no neck to speak of, and it had three or four fat chins. Its chins rolled right up under its ears, and its ears stuck out from its bald head. Fat hung over its wrists. Its arms and fingers were fat. Even calling it ugly does it credit" (p. 20).

Aside from Jack's persistence in denying the child a sex, part of the comedy lies in his realization that *"no words would come out of [his] mouth."* Then Jack was struck dumb, but *now* the memory calls forth a flood of words that – while repetitive and monosyllabic – still indicate that in his present attempt to convey the "specialness" about that night, Jack will consciously push himself to speak, to revise his experience in order to speak. He is resisting the temptation to fall silent. *"I made a wish that evening. Sitting there at the table, I closed my eyes for a minute and thought hard. What I wished for was that I'd never forget or otherwise let go of that evening"* (p. 25).

That night, upon returning home, Jack and Fran conceive their own child, in spite of never having wanted children before. Their son's coming signals a deterioration in their marriage, and in the present from which the story is told they "*don't talk about it. What's to say?*" If the story ended here, in the silence that overcomes so many others, it would surely qualify as more dead-end than "opening up". But Jack continues and the final passage seems a testimony to memory, i.e. re-vision, as a sanctifying power:

"But I remember that night. I recall the way the peacock picked up its gray feet and inched around the table. And then my friend and his wife saying goodnight to us on the porch. Olla giving Fran some peacock feathers to take home. I remember all of us shaking hands, hugging each other, saying things. [In the car, Fran sat close to me as we drove away. She kept her hand on my leg. We drove home like that from my friend's house]" (p. 26).

Jack's wish has come true because he has held on to the night in memory and has committed it to language. The final scene suggests that this is not "bad luck" but rather the part of the past that redeems the present. It consoles by reminding Jack that his and Fran's "mistake" had its real inception in love. He realizes that "*the change came later,*" and his re-vision of the past had led him to that knowledge. With the close of his narrative stressing the promise of that night, Jack defeats the stasis of despair.

From stasis to possibility

The passage from stasis to possibility is recorded even more clearly in "*Cathedral*" (1983), the story Carver felt to be a breakthrough. Much against his wishes, the unnamed narrator must confront a part of his wife's past when she is visited by a blind man who was once her employer. The narrator's prejudices and cynicism comprise limitations from which he has been too boorish or lazy to free himself. However, his confrontation with Robert, the blind man, has astounding effects on his own vision. His wife tells him the story of Robert's marriage to Beulah that ends eight years later with her death by cancer. The narrator's version reveals a consciousness ripe for change. He is impressed, almost in spite of himself, by the fact that a woman could marry, live with a man, and die without his ever knowing what she looked like.

"It was beyond my understanding. Hearing this, I felt sorry for the blind man for a little bit. And then I found myself thinking what a pitiful life this woman must have led. Imagine a woman who could never see herself as she was seen in the eyes of her loved one ... Someone who could wear makeup or not -- what difference to him? She could, if she wanted, wear green eye-shadow around one eye, a straight pin in her nostril, yellow slacks and purple shoes, no matter. And then to slip off into death, the blind man's hand on her hand, his blind eyes streaming tears -- I'm

imagining now – her last thought maybe this: that he never even knew what she looked like, and she on an express to the grave” (p. 213).

In the dynamic of the passage, the narrator contradicts his admission that *"It was beyond my understanding"*; in fact, "understanding" and "imagining" become identical. By re-vising the story provided by his wife, the speaker manages his own comprehension and through it feels the pangs of sympathy, none of which pervade his earlier account of his wife's attempted suicide. The act of the imagination becomes the first stage of genuine human contact.

Another example of such an energetic transfer occurs when the trio sits down to dinner: *"We dug in. We ate everything there was to eat on the table. We ate like there was no tomorrow. We didn't talk. We ate. We scarfed. We grazed that table. We were into serious eating. The blind man had right away located his foods, he knew just where everything was on his plate. I watched with admiration as he used his knife and fork on the meat"* (p. 217).

A simple colloquialism gives way to pleonastic variations on a theme, much like Jack's description of Harold in *"Feathers"*. Significantly, though, as soon as the narrator reveals an awareness of his medium, he also begins to notice the blind man, and that recognition is tinged with "admiration". The story thus far has shown that sympathy and admiration for others are novel feelings for the speaker. He is, in fact, learning to read, which is learning to re-vise.

In the crucial passage, the narrator and Robert sit watching *"something about the church and the Middle Ages"* on TV; that is, Robert listens, and our speaker watches and tries to describe what is depicted. When he attempts to convey a cathedral to his blind guest, he faces the bounds of his experience because of the limits of his language: *"I'm just no good at it."* Robert's solution is to have the narrator draw a cathedral on heavy paper while he rests his hand on the drawing hand. Caught up in the imaginative transfer, the speaker closes his eyes as Robert suggests and continues to draw, thinking, *"It was like nothing in my life up to now."*

"But I had my eyes closed. I thought I'd keep them that way for a little longer. I thought it was something I ought to do. "Well?" he said. "Are you looking?" My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything." "It's really something," I said" (p. 228).

The narrator experiences the same freedom that Carver himself describes above when he mentions an "opening up". He does this as a culmination of his pushing, pulling, and working with his language, in the process learning to do more than empathize or shift point of view. Point of view implies a metaphoric enclosure, a role, a situation. He has transcended that kind of specification and, in so doing, has escaped the bonds of his experience that trapped him. He is no longer *"inside*

anything". The confrontation with language has led him into the realm of an ineffable "something" beyond a linguistic register, beyond the power of words to inhibit, to the point at which they shatter. The confrontation and the attempt to achieve it, Carver implies, is the struggle that will result in "something", not "human noise" and darkness.

In an interview in 1983, Carver answered the question "Are you religious?" by saying, "No, but I have to believe in miracles and the possibility of resurrection" (*Fires*, p. 206). In these two stories we see Carver directing "miracles" of the type he believed possible. In the effort to transform actions into words or words into actions, these characters arrive at a language that is ultimately a means of freedom, of vision and re-vision.

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