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Robert Johnson

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# "Where I'm calling from": inside the loop

Robert Johnson

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- 1 In retrospect, the work of Raymond Carver has been assigned to all sorts of critical movements: Minimalism--though Carver objected to the term (see "Art" 210)--Dirty Realism, Neo-Realism, White Trash Fiction, Wised-Up Realism, the "Kafkaesque," Post (and Post-Post) Modernism, Existential Humanism, Humanistic Existentialism, Humanist Post-Modernism... even "Grunge" (see Adelman 8; Brown 126; Herzinger 8; as well as Russo 287 and Stull 5). A literary generation removed from the stories' riveting arrival, critics find such pigeon-holing useful.
- 2 Moreover, such a broad-ranging attempt to categorize the work is understandable, given the power of Carver's influence while he was writing. Interviewing Carver in 1986, Nicholas O'Connell remarks that while he was editor of *The Seattle Review*, he regularly read submissions that were, at heart, simply more "Raymond Carver stories." The writer responds with good humor, noting that even he recognized the influence and had himself stumbled upon the results of a "Raymond Carver Write-Alike Contest." David Applefield remarks to Carver in an interview the following year that "some literary editors" claimed at the time that "nearly half of the short fiction" they were receiving imitated Carver's style (qtd. in Gentry 209, 139).
- 3 Yet, as always--and in a literary parallel to what legalists might call "prior restraint,"--simplifications inevitably risk blinding readers, by creating expectations. In the wake of such opinions, it is tempting to see but what we have been taught to see, rather than precisely to listen to the text itself.
- 4 In the case of Carver's fiction, such training has left us apt to underestimate entrances to understanding his stories that place the fiction and explicate its concerns by working from the inside out, rather than moving from enveloping defining categories, back in.
- 5 An instance of such an effect can be seen in readings of Carver's celebrated short story "Where I'm Calling From" (*Cathedral*, 1983). Scholars have explicated the work variously, finding in the tale a healthy nest of thematic concerns, all the while creating

in their critical wake a widening horizon of reader expectations. The story has been read, for example, as a study in "narratorial reticence," as a portrait of the fear of engaging a dialogue that might well lead to painful self-exposures (Malamet). Yet, in contrast, the story also has been labeled an investigation of the search for a voice with which to communicate (Lehman), or as the documentation of a journey back into "sobriety and community" (Meyer). "Calling" has been seen, too, as an emblematic snapshot of a variety of the "talking cure" (Saltzman), and, on the other hand, as the elaboration of an "emergence from hardened insularity" by way of learning to listen (Nesset). Others have read the tale as a study of Carver's allegedly isolated, word-bound males, hungering to escape the prison of their own perceptions--a version of what critic Reamy Jansen has called Carver's sensitivity for "male loneliness" (395).

- 6 Admittedly, each of these approaches bears fruit. However, a thread common to them all--and perhaps offering a hint of the way out of this maze of readings and into a more unified sense of understanding--seems to have been overlooked. That is to say, at the heart of most readings of the story is the tacit acceptance of the fact that the tale is somehow about language, about the ability to understand life by telling stories, by knitting life into plots. A sociologist friend of mine calls the behavior "retrospective disambiguation," a knobby-shouldered term that simply means humans tell stories to find out who they are. We reclaim our pasts by making them into plots, narrative maps that lead us convincingly to be who we are (or think we are) now.
- 7 The tricky bit, though, is that by telling stories, often as not, we discover the flimsy nature of language itself, we see what a fabrication such plots turn out to be, how merely secondary they are to the actual experience of moment-to-moment living... while we learn that plots are all we have! And this, of course, is precisely the lesson that the narrator confronts in Carver's tale.
- 8 For readers who have not confronted the piece in a while, here is a *precis*: A first-person narration, the story offers the confession of a recovering alcoholic who has checked into an establishment identified as "Frank Martin's drying-out facility." The narrator confides that he has been passing his time listening to a former chimney sweep named Joe Penny--called here "J.P."--recount how he met, wooed, married (and then destroyed his relationship with) an affectionate and imposing woman named Roxie, from whom he, in fact, learned his sweep's trade. The narration takes place during the end-of-year holidays: a period in the year's cycle often associated with family, with reunion, with reminders of time itself, with the end of the old and the start of things new... with resolutions. By tale's end, the narrator has reached a point where, he confides, it might now be possible for him to attempt to call his wife, an act of communication he has avoided.
- 9 Sitting on the porch at the "facility," listening to (fellow "drunk") J.P.'s story, the narrator learns to empathize, learns the value of the tale and its telling (127). While listening, he learns, too, the ritualized nature of such narratives. They are an intricate part of an essential social exchange. You tell me who you are; I perhaps find the courage to reciprocate; we buoy each other toward possibilities of understanding. Or, I use your abilities to self-narrate as a support while I engage my own... or use them to build my faith in such narration to start with. We wrap stories around the chaos of our individual lives, we knit ourselves into communal and narrative fabrics, knowing all along that at any instant life can and will intrude--and disassemble--all of our good work.

- 10 In Carver's tale, reminders of such threat abound. As an example, the piece opens upon the terrifying experience of another of the narrator's housemates, Tiny, whom he labels (as if a character from Central Casting) as a jolly "big fat guy, an electrician from Santa Rosa." Over breakfast, Tiny is sharing yarns with his companions at table regarding his "drinking bouts." Tiny, the narrator sums, "would say something, grin, then look around the table for a sign of recognition." Having done equally "bad and crazy" things in their own drinking days, Tiny's fellows can laugh along, confirm his sense of what the drinking life is all about, his notion of how and why he has arrived at the facility. Tiny, though, too, has plans for the future: he hopes quickly to dry out and return home. He has visions of spending New Year's Eve with his wife, eating cookies and drinking hot chocolate. Unfortunately, right in the middle of Tiny's performance, the narrator notes, suddenly, "Tiny wasn't there anymore. He'd gone off his chair with a big clatter" and crashed onto the floor. An alcoholic seizure has, without warning, intervened (128).
- 11 Tiny's experience, importantly, alters the mood of his companions—including the narrator. For, if such a swift blow can be dealt to the dreams and fabrications of so imposing and gregarious a man as Tiny, who can be safe? The narrator interrogates Tiny afterwards, attempting to fathom a pattern in the poor man's experience, something that might provide a clue to what he could expect in his own recovery: "I'd ask him if he had any signal just before it happened. I'd like to know if he felt his ticker skip a beat, or else begin to race. Did his eyelid twitch?" The narrator judges that "what happened to Tiny is something [he] won't ever forget." Yet, Tiny is not much help, for he has lost his desire to speak, no longer feels confident in naming what his experience means or in plotting hopeful futures (129). Stories, we see, only go so far. Life will not be bound by them.
- 12 A related message rises from the narrator's not engaging the facility director's suggestion that he might read through Jack London's novel *Call of the Wild* (137). Yes, London was an alcoholic, and his dying from drink may well provide a valuable lesson, but his story does not necessarily hold an answer for the narrator, who must learn to escape the past and to spin his own fragile webs. No magic awaits—not, at least, in books.
- 13 Carver's narrator reminds us, too, that story-telling can be a kind of whistling in the dark, a way of erecting verbal tents under which to hide, in the face of life's harsh lessons and realities. As an instance, he notes the presence of a big-talking salesman at the facility, a "guy who travels." Infatuated with his own importance and inflated sense of self-control, the traveler claims "to have his drinking under control." He will not allow himself to be labeled a "drunk," either. Such a tag "can ruin a good man's prospects." Of his own having lost memories of periods in his life, he remarks only, "Anyone can have a blackout." If he would stick to "whiskey and water," no ice, he assures his listeners, he'd never have problems. "Who do you know in Egypt?" he asks the narrator. "I can use a few names over there" (140).
- 14 Amidst this welter of language spun for so many elaborate purposes, however, something stands out about J.P.'s story that attracts the narrator's attention. J.P.'s honestly and accurately naming his own weaknesses and self-destructive foundering draws the narrator like a lodestone, rings with authenticity, with clear-as-a-slap-on-the-face truth. Here is a man with the courage to name his own transgressions and to say of them this is who I am. J.P. shows himself to be a man who can embrace the

mystery in his behavior, as well. Of his losing his family to drink, he admits, "I had everything I wanted. I had a wife and kids I loved, and I was doing what I wanted to do with my life... who knows why we do what we do?" (133). The salesman hungers after Cairo, shuns threatening labels, wants new names that solve the riddle of his arrival in new ports. J.P. wants to find a way to understand how to live right, here and now... or at least he verges toward the desire. Notably, when Roxie arrives for a visit and asks her husband if they can drive to a restaurant, J.P. carefully cautions her that he had better stay at the facility, for now. "I think they'd like it if I didn't leave the place for a little while yet. We can have coffee here," he tells her (143). J.P. is no longer on the run.

- 15 Central to the meaning of Carver's tale, I propose, is J.P.'s describing his having, as a child, fallen down a well "in the vicinity of the farm he grew up on." The narrator recounts that J.P. had "suffered all kinds of terror in that well, hollering for help, waiting, and then hollering some more." From the bottom, J.P. recalls, all he could see of the world was a blue circle of sky: "Every once in a while a white cloud passed over. A flock of birds flew across, and it seemed to J.P. their wingbeats set up this odd commotion." J.P. heard other, more disturbing, noises, too, like of the wind or of (he thought) insects that could rain down over his head. Only after J.P.'s yelling "himself hoarse," listening to the distant sounds of the world, is he dropped a line by his father and hauled up (130).
- 16 In like fashion, the narrator seems to be dropped a line by J.P.'s story-telling. The narrator prods J.P. along, "Keep talking, J.P. Then what?" Unable as yet to bring himself to call either his wife (who brought him in on his first visit to the facility) or his girlfriend (who dropped him off this, his second, time in) the narrator is shown from J.P.'s honest accounting how to strike a balance between reticence and speaking, between acknowledging the paucity of human understanding, and the need for stories to carry us along through our witnessing to the inescapable chaos of our lives. When Roxie arrives-- and as a sort of gesture toward at least sympathetic participation--the narrator even can bring himself to request a good-luck kiss (143).
- 17 Shortly thereafter, at story's end, the narrator returns to his memories of Jack London and of having read "To Build a Fire," in high school. A recounting of the London story's outcome--snow crushing the fire, night coming on, sure death waiting--escorts the narrator to rethinking his own situation. He, too, is reaching a critical decision-making in his attempt at survival. He's got the shakes, now, he admits. The detoxification of his body is proceeding along predictable, though harrowing, lines. He still hungers for drink, he reveals, though the thought depresses him (144). This is real. He must live it out. And yet... influenced by J.P.'s confessions, by the man's sobriety regarding his own status and motivations, the narrator decides, in the story's final lines, he actually might call his wife. He's not going to "bring up business," though--just make contact (146). The last time they had tried to talk, they had screamed at each other, she had dismissed him as a "Wet Brain!" (140).
- 18 He's not going to offer her any stories, that is. He appears to have reached his own acknowledged well-bottom, and has chosen to stop yelling up at the sky, caught in the web of words, shouting back at the world. Psychologically, he has yelled himself hoarse. "There's no way to make a joke out of this," he admits. If she asks him where he is calling from, he will have to tell her. Leaning on J.P.'s stories, all the while seeing those stories' shortcomings (they do not, after all, finally explain what has happened or will happen to J.P.), has been the narrator's salvation. For, by the tale's end, he

demonstrates his gathered awareness that stories are always after the fact... after the reality of Tiny's collapse, of London's death, of J.P.'s having thrown his happy life away for no apparent reason, of his own previous inability honestly to engage having hit bottom. Importantly, he remarks that if he doesn't call his wife, he might call his girlfriend. And if she asks him where he is calling from, he imagines, he will tell her simply "It's me" (146).

- 19 In Carver's world that is the place all understandings of the human situation are thought to have to start. It's me. I'm here. *I am the place from which I have to speak and understand my life. My most authentic stories grow from here. Everything else is so much juggling, so much dancing on ice. That is to say, yes, we must speak, but recognize as well the essential mystery speaking never can solve.*
- 20 Assessing the mood of Carver's fiction, Carver's fit with his times, Marc Chénétier notes the writer's sensitivity to the indeterminate nature of human existence. Life's changeable nature, met by the shortcomings of the human ability accurately to capture in language what we live, makes for a presentation whose tone suggests the separation that exists between what we can say and what we must live. Language takes on a life of its own. Chénétier notes "Where I'm Calling From" as a story in which, for example, readers observe the "time-stuffing achieved by oral language [that is] so desperate to have nothing to hitch on to it is compelled to maintain an endless recycled babble, a recourse as hollow and as minimally life-preserving as inflatable jackets." All of Carver's stories, he adds, should "open and close with question marks, suspended as they are between untold causes and problematic developments" (175-76).
- 21 I would, though, beg that we notice that in this tale the narrator does appear to see through this very situation. Having listened J.P. out, having recognized the legitimate value of the man's relationship to Roxie (see Campbell 69, Lehman 56), having reassessed his own status, and done so with a good deal of objectivity, he now approaches at least an attempt to make contact with one of the women in his life. In addition, he wants to make the contact without theatrics. He desires a simple exchange built up from a basic, a fundamental, placing of the self: I am here. "It's me." Critic Hamilton E. Cochrane observes of the narrator's change, "listening to J.P., paradoxically, seems both to take the narrator away from his own pain and, at the same time, to offer a paradigm that brings him back to his own experience with new understanding" (qtd. in Meyer 136).
- 22 In his own stumbling way, one might argue, the narrator has gotten a practical whiff of what linguistics has dubbed *aporia*: the recognition that systems of meaning are built up from other systems, are ultimately self-referential (see Norris 48-55, for a concise sum). Down in the well, buried in names for the world, you literally cannot get out, there is no escape. You must be dropped a line. You must stop shouting and be hauled up. The rough linguistic parallel is to enter the *freplay* of dialogue. In just such a way, the narrator's rescue is accomplished by engaging J.P.'s disarming stories, tales not told to obfuscate or to self-aggrandize, but offered as a gift to an ailing companion. Summarizing the effect of J.P.'s story, Kirk Nessel remarks that Carver's tale "embodies and dramatizes our tendency to discover ourselves in the stories of others, to complicate other lives with our own as we collaborate toward understanding, toward liberation from the confinements that kill" (61).
- 23 Finally, our stories are all we have to give, Carver shows. They do not solve anything. But they perform a kind of credentialing--they say, this is how I see myself. This is how

my life happened. Honestly accepted, they can spur the receiver to generate in exchange a story of his own. The narrator of Carver's tale has done just that, and his audience is made up of Carver's readers, who are, in effect, asked to role-play, to take a chair on the porch with the narrator and J.P., flip butts in the coal bucket, snug a sweater up against the cold, accept what one reader of Carver's work has called the "inexplicable randomness" of life (Shute 6)--and then to speak honest words. Perhaps this is one of Raymond Carver's most profound legacies: He prods us toward the light, toward an understanding of how our limitations and confusions demand that we lead more ethical lives.

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## ABSTRACTS

Le présent article propose d'aborder la nouvelle à travers le récit de J.P., personnage qui raconte au narrateur comment on lui avait sauvé la vie quand, un jour, il était tombé dans un puits.

En saisissant l'histoire de J.P. comme une corde de sauvetage, le narrateur de la nouvelle, qui a d'une autre manière lui aussi « touché le fond », est également « sauvé ». En effet, il découvre un nouvel équilibre : savoir se taire est aussi important que parler, écouter, aussi nécessaire que dire. Il faudrait établir une mesure entre silence et parole. Autrement dit, il est bon de savoir tisser des histoires mais il faut aussi être en mesure d'en couper le fil quand cela est nécessaire. C'est alors que les histoires sont comme des bouées de sauvetage qui nous aident à trouver un sens sans s'abîmer dans l'océan de l'existence.

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Robert JOHNSON enseigne à Midwestern State University, à Wichita Falls, Texas, USA. Parmi ses plus récentes publications notons une étude sur les nouvelles de Bharati Mukerjee paru dans le *MAWA Review*, une nouvelle dans la revue numérique *Amarillo Bay*, et une autre à paraître en janvier 2000 dans l'anthologie intitulée *New Texas*.