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Claudine Verley

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# "Errand," or Raymond Carver's Realism in a Champagne Cork

Claudine Verley

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- 1 "Errand" is an altogether surprising short story among the works of Raymond Carver. The usual characters and themes are not to be found, nor are the settings, nor even is the so-called minimalist narrative mode or style. The story initially presents itself as a conventional biographical narrative (covering the illness and death of Chekhov), but it is soon transformed by excisions, extensions, and expansions. The writer's work on the implicit hypotext fictionalizes the biographical facts, to which he adds imaginary episodes.<sup>1</sup> These episodes become increasingly detailed, and the last part of the story (there are four parts) has no connection at all with what seemed to be the subject and its treatment at the beginning. Chekhov is dead, and the scene the following day that brings together Olga Knipper and the young bellboy, whom she requests to go fetch a mortician, constitutes an unlikely development. The episode is a temporal "bubble" that soon turns spatial when Olga becomes the narrator and develops her own story within the story. She moves her protagonist, a young bellboy, through time, from the prospective conditional ("would"), to the narrative past, and finally to the present. She also moves him in space, from the hotel bedroom to the street and thence to the mortician's house. By shifting from hypotext to hypertext, from one narrative level to the other, from the imaginary story to the illusion of reality, Carver for the first time in his career experiments with the richness and complexity of narrative performance and inscribes into his text the fragile boundaries that separate the real from the imaginary.<sup>2</sup> In this way, he prompts readers to interrogate the very realism that critics have called the main attribute (or major defect) of his work.

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- 2 The hypotext of "Errand" is to be found in and between the lines of the text, contingent on the reader's perspicacity. It remains implicit or fictive, since no single, identifiable

text can be found, as well as multiple. The hypotext stems from many sources of information: Suvorin's and Tolstoy's diaries, Marie Chekhov's and Olga Knipper's memoirs, Chekhov's words as reported by different people, and the various biographies Carver may have consulted, notably Henry Troyat's *Chekhov*. Thus, the story proves unstable and uncertain at its core. It takes root in a hypothetical and nonexistent combination of documents that contaminate each other without leaving traces. Different genres are also mixed (diary, memoir, letter, and press release), and different voices run through the hypertext. These voices express themselves in the direct style of letters or spoken words, in the past-tense narration of memoirs, and in the present-tense narration of diaries or newspapers. There is no single, unifying voice, such as that of an extradiegetic narrator who alone controls the narrative. Rather, there is a constant intertextual contamination, the strains of which we may or may not manage to distinguish. To put the matter more poetically, there is a discreet polyphony.<sup>3</sup> The free indirect style that becomes increasingly dominant in parts three and four develops this polyphony, gradually establishing a second narrative voice and a second story.

- 3 All voices in "Errand" speak of Chekhov, of course, telling of his serious hemoptysis of 22 March 1897 and his painful death on the night of the 2 July 1904. These are realities, but reactions and feelings of friends and relatives supplement the easily identifiable objective elements: facts, dates, and places. Thus, a subjective filter is interposed between the supposed reality of a hypothetical biography and Carver's short story. Reality is transformed at the same time it is transcribed into a fictional story on, as it were, a primary level. Hence, the hypertext can establish only a remote relation to Chekhov's life in a secondary fictionalization that for a while masquerades as a conventional biography. Here again the text develops through successive shifts and modulates between objective and subjective modes of presentation. "Chekhov," the opening word of "Errand," also constitutes the story's first sentence. The surname suggests an entry in a biographical dictionary, as if Carver were writing a conventional life of the writer. After this, individual viewpoints drawn from various autobiographical sources periodically intervene and introduce subjective viewpoints. Finally, from the middle of the second part forward, exclusive references to Olga Knipper's *Memoirs* signal the definitive selection of a single viewpoint and subjectivity. Thereafter, the hypotext is exclusively autobiographical, and the hypertext, in parallel fashion, assumes an openly fictional character. Olga Knipper's *Memoirs* are quoted again at the end of the third part of the story. The fourth part, however, opens with an unlikely scene – the long silent confrontation between Olga and the bellboy – which becomes increasingly improbable in Olga's final speech. At this point, the life and death of Chekhov have dropped out of the picture, the historical facts are abandoned, and we find ourselves in the subjective development of a wholly fictional narrative. Traces of the hypotext in the hypertext thus permit us to highlight features that become increasingly important to the short story: the equal validity of multiple voices that compete with the narrator's voice, the essentially problematic status of reality in the story, and the primary importance of fictionalization.
- 4 It is on this last point that I wish to concentrate this study of the open structure formed by the story and its hypotext. How do we move from seemingly objective biographical data to the totally fictional narrative mentioned above? Three stages need to be distinguished in this movement towards "fictivity."

- 5 First of all, the text of the story is the product of significant transformations and excisions. Seven years of Chekhov's life disappear into the space break that separates the first part of the story from the second. Chekhov's marriage and the composition of *The Cherry Orchard* are later mentioned, but only in brief analepses that reveal the narrator's work on the text and destroy any illusion of conventional biography. Two moments in Chekhov's life are highlighted in accord with a definite perspective: the hemoptysis of 22 March 1897 and the agony of the night of 2 July 1904. At the center of the narrative is the man himself and the illness that brings about his death. Chekhov the writer is seldom mentioned, and this eminently personal choice by the narrator marks another variation on the implicit biographical model. Certain modifications of biographical data are relatively minor. For example, Dr. Schwörer, who in the text is moved by sudden inspiration when he orders champagne, in fact ordered it for medical reasons. The champagne was intended to stimulate Chekhov's weakened heart. The scene depicted in the story is surely the same one as in real life, but the practical motive goes unmentioned. Lyricism triumphs over historical truth. It may be said that this kind of deviation, like the above-mentioned silences, lends a distinctive tonality to Carver's story without violating its biographical framework.
- 6 It is Carver's amplifications that eventually get the better of the framework. Using the terms of Gérard Genette, we may distinguish extensions or additions of one or more episodes unconnected to the initial situation (*Palimpsestes* 298-306). One example is to be found in the last lines of the story's second part that evoke the entirely imaginary scene of the bellboy's rude awakening in the hotel kitchen. There are also expansions of "circumstances" that represent the dilation of a certain detail. For example, when the telephone call is made by Dr. Schwörer, we are given superfluous details about how the telephone operates. A third example of expansion (or perhaps extension, if the arrival of the bellboy with three roses is also a figment of the narrator's imagination) is the entire fourth part of the story. This section is comprised of a development that is undoubtedly fictional, based on a vase of roses. In these three examples the amplifications come from the narrator, the only possible focalizer. In the episode that takes place in the "lower regions" of the hotel, for instance, the simultaneous depiction of the kitchens and the rooms occupied by the Chekhovs could not come from a character's viewpoint. At the same time, focalization by the characters increases the fictionalization of a narrative that would remain nonfocalized (so-called omniscient narration) were it exclusively biographical.
- 7 It is not, then, simply a matter of quotations from Chekhov's relatives, quotations that could well appear in the biographical framework. It is a matter, rather, of short passages in which description comes from a single character's perspective. For example, it may come from the physician's point of view: "Dr. Schwörer pulled on his big moustache and stared at Chekhov. The writer's cheeks were sunken and gray, his complexion waxen; his breath was raspy" (*Where* 518). Or it may reflect the perceptions of the bellboy: "He found a place on the table for the bucket and glasses, all the while craning his neck, trying to see into the other room, where someone panted ferociously for breath. It was a dreadful, harrowing sound... Then this big imposing man with a thick moustache pressed some coins into his hand – a large tip, by the feel of it – and suddenly the young man saw the door open" (519).
- 8 These narrative transformations logically entail other changes. For example, there is an increasing prevalence of free indirect style to express the focalizing characters'

thoughts: "Dr. Schwöhrer stroked his moustache with the back of a finger. Why not? After all, what difference would it make to anyone whether this matter became known now or a few hours from now? The only detail that remained was to fill out a death certificate, and this could be done at his office later on in the morning, after he'd slept a few hours" (521). There is also a shifting sense of space as it is perceived by various observers in different places: "He [the bellboy] cast his gaze about once more. Through an open door he saw that the third glass was in the bedroom, on the nightstand. But someone still occupied the bed! He couldn't see a face, but the figure under the covers lay perfectly motionless and quiet" (523). Finally, time is increasingly decelerated in scenes and even "stretches" where characters' thoughts expand the time of the story, as in the penultimate example above and in the abnormally long silence between Olga Knipper and the bellboy (523). These transformations are common narrative devices in fiction. In texts that do not immediately present themselves as fictional, they serve as fictional markers.

- 9 The most striking narrative transformation remains to be discussed. It is also a transvocalization, since there is a major shift in the source of the narrative in the fourth part of the story. In this section, after addressing the bellboy to request him to fetch a mortician, Olga Knipper drifts smoothly into a second narrative of a quite different type. It is not a metadiegetic narrative recounting an episode that has happened to characters in definite places at definite times. Rather, it involves the development of an imaginary "errand" that places an entirely fictive character in an unknown location and a prospective time, the action bearing no relation to the pseudoreality of the initial narrative. With this development, the ambiguous relationship between reality and fiction grows increasingly complex. After the fictionalization of a biographical and autobiographical hypotext (which has itself filtered factual events), the story within the story necessitates a redefinition of reality and fiction, with each mirroring the other at different levels.

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- 10 If the open structure we have examined illuminates the process of fictionalization in the hypertext, the closed structure formed by the two narrative levels compels interest from a different point of view. Olga Knipper, the intradiegetic narrator, constructs a narrative from her immediate experience – not on the basis of other narratives – and thus locates herself in relation to the first level of pseudoreality. She defines the subject matter of her discourse and determines the boundaries of the probable and the improbable. The question of literary creation is thus raised at the second level of the story. For the intradiegetic narrator, reality proves to be what was previously defined as fictional. This turnabout sets the stage for Carver's brilliant performance in the last two pages, a tour de force that leaves the reader at once delighted and perplexed.
- 11 For Olga Knipper, reality lies in the fiction of the first narrative, the "errand" she entrusts to the bellboy: "She needed him to go out and bring back a mortician." The request is straightforward and the instructions accompanying it are precise: "She wanted him to go downstairs and ask someone at the front desk where he could go to find the most respected mortician in the city" (524). Nothing ensues, however, and the order remains unexecuted. What sets things moving, including the bellboy, is the second totally fictional errand of the metadiegetic narrative: "And if it would help keep

his movements purposeful he should imagine himself as someone moving down the busy sidewalk carrying in his arms a porcelain vase of roses that he had to deliver to an important man.... He was to walk briskly, comporting himself at all times in as dignified a manner as possible. He should keep walking until he came to the mortician's house and stood before the door. He would then raise the brass knocker..." (525). In this second narrative the young man finds himself face to face with the mortician, who "takes the vase of roses" and pronounces the mission accomplished: "Just a minute and I'll be with you." If the shift to fiction proves curiously necessary for the achievement of the "real" project, it is because "reality" has already been suffused with imprecision and repetition. The errand, initially defined with concrete verbs, gets bogged down in increasingly vague and abstract formulations: "I have specifically requested you to perform *this duty* for me"; "do *this* for me"; and finally, "he was engaged on an important *errand*" (524-25, my italics). Paralleling this dilution into the abstract, a reduction to the smallest detail takes place and obliterates the global meaning of the mission. Olga's order that the bellboy "go downstairs and ask someone at the front desk where he could go to find the most respected mortician in the city" is repeated in three similar forms: "Tell them downstairs . . ."; "tell them downstairs that I insist"; and finally, "Just say that this is necessary, that I request it." Reality thus degenerates into a sterile repetition of trivialities. Recourse to the fictional appears, paradoxically, as the necessary implementation of an errand that has otherwise lost its substance and meaning. "He was to behave exactly as if he were engaged on an important errand, nothing more. He was engaged on a very important errand, she said. And if it would help keep his movements purposeful he should imagine himself...." (525). The mission or errand is inserted between two imaginary situations ("as if," "And if...he should imagine") that seem to justify its existence ("as if he were engaged"; "He was engaged") and purpose.

- 12 For the bellboy, it will be a matter of implicitly pursuing the first objective (fetching a mortician) and explicitly delivering the flowers he holds in his hand. The imaginary errand thus combines reality and fiction in a task that is at once different and similar. While the discourse of reality reveals its sterility, the fictional discourse preserves, transforms, and reinvigorates reality. Thus, the narrator who controls her prospective story ("she said"; "She spoke quietly, almost confidentially") fades away when she shifts into the role of omniscient narrator in the description of the mortician: "He was a man of restraint and bearing.... Long ago he'd acquainted himself with death..." Indeed, the final scene is depicted with absolute immediacy, in present tense: "The mortician takes the vase of roses.... But the one time the young man mentions the name of the deceased, the mortician's eyebrows rise just a little. Chekhov, you say? Just a minute, and I'll be with you" (526). Olga's viewpoint fades out and the reader witnesses a scene that brings together two doubly fictional characters (on the first and second narrative levels) in an imaginary situation that is presented as reality. This narrative transformation explains the reader's confusion when, after the mortician's question to the young man, a second question brusquely follows: "Do you understand what I'm saying?" In both cases, the same character, the bellboy, is designated by "you," but the speaker of each question is a different person. Olga reenters the story. In fact, it is she who has been speaking all along. The reader is thrust back to the rooms occupied by the Chekhovs at the hotel, to the empty glasses and the bottle of champagne, all of which had been temporarily forgotten.

- 13 This interplay between the first and second narrative levels – between reality, pseudoreality, and the fictional – may be compared to the movement from hypotext to hypertext discussed earlier. With each shift, the same process occurs: reality yields to the fictional, which itself plays the role of pseudoreality at the next fictional level. Verisimilitude lies in this concomitance of the real and the fictional, and in "Errand" it is to be found in the general framework of the story or hypertext that stems from multiple transpositions modifying distant historical facts. Verisimilitude arises, too, in the second narrative imagined by Olga Knipper. We do not see the extradiegetic narrator at work elaborating the fictional narrative, only the textual traces of this fictionalization. But the intradiegetic narrator creates her story and speaks this creation at the same time, thus allowing us to note the shift: "*He could even tell himself that the man he was going to see was expecting him, was perhaps impatient for him to arrive with his flowers. Nevertheless, the young man was not to become excited and run, or otherwise break his stride. Remember the vase he was carrying!*" (525, my italics). The same bellboy who is Olga's interlocutor on the level of "reality" ("he could even tell himself") also serves as a character in the second narrative ("the young man"). The action moves from one narrative level to another as if there were continuity between them. The shift is only a matter of terms, of distance from the character ("the young man") or the narratee ("remember....").
- 14 Must we conclude from this that reality and fiction are confounded? That realism is an artificial concept? Does Carver end his career by thumbing his nose at his admirers as well as his detractors? The answer is complicated by the last two paragraphs of the story. Olga's narrative loses its autonomy and reveals its artificiality: "Do you understand what I am saying, Olga said to the young man. Leave the glasses.... Everything is ready now. We're ready. Will you go?" (526). The bellboy is not the hero who accomplishes his mission. It is not even certain whether he has understood a word of what has been said. The question "Will you go?" remains unanswered. And if, in Olga's story, the mortician takes the roses, in "reality" the bellboy picks up the cork of the champagne bottle. Hence there arises a retrospective irony regarding the errand as the initiation journey of a young man who will gain knowledge of death. If life and death are intertwined, their connection lies not in the mortician's gesture but in the gesture of the young man. In one hand the bellboy holds the vase of roses that evokes the new day coming. With the other he picks up the cork of the spent bottle. There is a symbolic meaning, but it is linked to the "real" situation and to its triviality. At the beginning, it was a matter of a simple "errand." The bellboy, a light-haired youth with round cheeks, could be the object of a request. He could not, however, serve as the subject of a mission, a modern knight errant on an eternal quest. Perhaps it is the actress in Olga Knipper that prompts her to "err" in this incongruous play, a play in which an image born of her subjectivity obliterates the true being of the character: "He would then raise the brass knocker and let it fall, once, twice, three times. In a minute the mortician himself would answer.... This mortician would be in his forties, no doubt, or maybe early fifties – bald, solidly built, wearing steel-frame spectacles set very low on his nose.... An apron. Probably he would be wearing an apron. He might even be wiping his hands on a dark towel while he listened to what was being said" (525-26). But the imaginary scene with its three knocks and detailed stage directions does not hold up against the narrow-minded stubbornness of reality: "*But.... the young man was thinking of the cork still resting near the toe of his shoe....*" (526, my italics). Everything in the room is tidy except this half-empty bottle of champagne and the cork that



catches the eye and draws the gesture: "The young man wanted to bend over and pick up the cork, but he was still holding the roses and was afraid of seeming to intrude even more by drawing any further attention to himself. Reluctantly, he left the cork where it was and raised his eyes" (522-23). The bellboy will stay thus on guard in front of Olga until he can finally react, move, and touch; in other words, reestablish contact with reality and life: "To retrieve it he would have to bend over, still gripping the vase. He would do this. He leaned over. Without looking down, he reached out and closed it into his hand" (526). At this point, the edifice of Olga's drama collapses like a house of cards. Minor concrete details get the last word, and the story ends with the mundane gesture of a secondary character who pursues his ordinary life a few feet from Chekhov's body. But is this not, after all, an ending worthy of Chekhov?

- 15 Through imperceptible shifts and uncontrolled slides the narrative has transformed itself, by changing narrators, into a pure creation of the mind. The last page of "Errand" presents a situation that seems more real than reality. Admittedly, as we have seen, the discourse of reality can be vague and repetitive. But artificiality threatens the discourse of fiction. The second narrative produces an inauthentic character (the young bellboy as stock dramatic messenger), involved in an improbable "mission" that involves trumped-up symbolism. The result is a sham fiction whose dependence on the first narrative will shatter the fragile structure. The rupture becomes glaring when Olga loses her status as narrator and becomes once more a mere character. This shift in voice and viewpoint creates a strange feeling of uneasiness. Earlier transformations of hypertext into hypertext were invisible, and the passage from the real to the fictional was imperceptible. At this point, however, the layers of the work can be seen and the joins appear. Our first shock is followed by a second when we return to earth, at floor level, with the champagne cork beside the bellboy's shoe. The young man's only goal seems to be to retrieve the cork. The "reality effect" is clear in this pathetic preoccupation of a character who lives in the present moment. In addition, there is the strangeness of the object that draws the eye and the incongruity of ordinary behavior in the face of the tragic death of a man. But is it a man or a writer we refer to when the name of Chekhov is mentioned?
- 16 We stated earlier that the first word of "Errand" calls to mind an entry in a biographical dictionary. It is thus Chekhov the writer who opens the story, and we are later told he did not believe in anything that could not be apprehended by the senses (514). Nevertheless, in the first part and even more so in the next two parts, Chekhov appears primarily as a man suffering and slowly dying. He also appears (or wants to appear) the opposite: "he continually *tried to minimize the seriousness of his condition*. To all *appearances, it was as if he felt, right up to the end, that he might be able to throw off the disease as he would a lingering catarrh*. Well into his final days, he spoke with *seeming conviction of the possibility of an improvement*" (515, my italics). Later, Chekhov will sit on the balcony of the hotel at Badenweiler (where he may be seen) and ask for information about boat times (an act that may be heard). In fact, he creates a theatrical representation of the good health he knows he has forever lost. Perhaps we may see in this the creation of a fiction that is not at all literary. For a writer who can no longer write, life becomes a fiction. And when Chekhov the man dies, the movement is reversed. There is a return to the ever-living author. When Olga gives her instructions to the bellboy, she says first, "Herr Chekhov [is] dead," then "Anton Chekhov [is] dead." Death inhabits the individual as it does the social personage. When the mortician listens to the young man's request, however, he raises his eyebrows at



the mention of the writer's name: "Chekhov, you say ?" This question shatters the fiction constructed by Olga and recalls the reality of dirty glasses, the champagne cork, and a bellboy who is Chekhovian without knowing it. At this point, we reencounter the first word of the story: "Chekhov." In contrast to Chekhov the man, who represents appearance and death, Chekhov the writer asserts himself as being and life. The three yellow roses, held firmly by the bellboy until the last line of the story, evoke the totality of existence, from birth to death (the symbol of three). The roses are also associated with the green of the bellboy's jacket, suggesting the regeneration of Chekhov, who is seen as both mortal man and immortal writer.<sup>4</sup> The real Chekhov is the writer, and the man appears as his fictive image, an image that may be the passing object of the fiction but does not constitute its subject.<sup>5</sup>

- 17 Discussing "Errand" with an interviewer, Carver said, "There's that story of mine that came out recently, a tribute, an homage to Chekhov. It has something to do with Chekhov's last days and his death. It's different from anything I've ever done" (Applefield 213) In "Errand," Chekhov's death is indeed the equivalent of a minor event that is seen, heard, or experienced, Henry James's tiny "germ," whose function is to provide the writer with a starting point. The event has little relation to the title of the story and constitutes only a background, albeit a moving one, to the fourth part. Chekhov the man disappears from the physical and narrative levels; Chekhov the writer persists in the eminently literary interplay between reality and fiction, the lifelike and the unlikely. The uncanny episode of the champagne cork clashes with the tragic death of the man but supplies a lesson in realism that would have pleased the writer. Here we see the true homage Carver pays his master, as well as elements of a poetic art that emerges in Carver's last two short-story collections.

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- 18 First of all, Carver's realism, as "minimalist" as it may seem, has nothing to do with a flat commentary on the real world. To approach it in that way would be like restricting the nature and impact of hyperrealism in painting to an exact copying of reality. As John Barth notes in "A Few Words about Minimalism," the principle according to which "less is more" is not new, and it has long contributed to the creation of masterpieces in literature as well as painting. What I wish to stress here is the affinity between realism and the uncanny in Carver's work, in hyperrealist art, and in Edward Hopper's paintings many years earlier. How is it that certain things – a gesture, a few words, an object, a banal incident – assume unusual prominence and uncanny resonance when they are inscribed into everyday reality?<sup>6</sup> A look at the work of Hopper and the hyperrealists may help answer this question, which involves a conception of realism quite different from that of the nineteenth century.
- 19 The hyperrealists, at least those associated with relativist realism, abandoned the idea that reality exists in itself as something unchanging, something the artist attempts to recreate and which takes its meaning from its context.<sup>7</sup> This reassuring conception of the universe has been thrust aside in favor of the transitory point of view. Since things have no existence in themselves, they become real only through the mediation of consciousness or the camera, in the collusion of object and subject, or in the extension of a reality that escapes the eye. In all cases, point of view, whether subjective or objective, is preeminent. The object exists only as represented; it has no intrinsic

significance. It is up to the spectator to give the object meaning. On a technical level, we may also note the importance of framing, a process that goes hand in hand with concern for point of view. We can find examples of this in Chuck Close's close-ups of faces or in close-ups of objects or clothes by Gnoli or Hofkunst. The same may be said of Edward Hopper's paintings, with their characters frozen in mid-gesture, their buildings pictured frontally (unless they appear in a combination of several points of view), and their unexpected perspectives that call to mind acrobatic shots. It is this same concern for framing that cuts off one side of houses or their rooftops, for example. This is a distinctive kind of realism that keeps characters at a distance by immobilizing them in certain behaviors. Such art is often called frozen because of the extent to which it seeks to be bare, stripped of anecdotal detail – much like Carver's bare, pared-down stories.

- 20 There remains the champagne cork, however. It recalls the peacock that abruptly lands in front of Jack and Fran in "Feathers" – and the cast of Olla's teeth atop the television set in the same story. It recalls, too, the old man and the woman who exchange incomprehensible remarks before Miss Dent in "The Train," or the dead leaves the narrator of "Menudo" obstinately rakes. These small and insignificant realistic details assume uncanny importance because they are perceived by particular characters. Miss Dent, for example, knows nothing about the past of the other two characters and therefore cannot grasp what they are saying. Similar perplexities arise at the end of "Preservation" in *Cathedral*:

Sandy cleared the newspaper away and shoved the food to the far side of the table. "Sit down," she said to her husband once more. He moved his plate from one hand to the other. But he kept standing there. It was then she saw puddles of water on the table. She heard water, too. It was dripping off the table and onto the linoleum. She looked down at her husband's bare feet. She stared at his feet next to the pool of water. She knew she'd never again in her life see anything so unusual. (46)

- 21 Sandy's husband is, of course, not melting. It is merely the food defrosting on the table. For a few seconds, however, the reader is disoriented because, like Sandy, the reader focuses on "his feet next to a pool of water," to the exclusion of all else, including the logical explanation. Focalization and framing highlight one part of reality and give it uncanny immediacy.<sup>8</sup> At several earlier points in the story, all Sandy could see of her husband, laid out on the sofa, was his head and feet: "She saw his head come down on the pillow that lay across the arm of the sofa" (44); "In the darkened room she could just make out her husband's head and his bare feet" (45); "She saw his head come up from the end of the sofa" (46). In the final sentence of the story the connection between the body parts and the person disappears: "She put her plate on the table and watched until *the feet* left the kitchen and went back into the living room" (46, my italics). We are reminded of the dismembered corpse and fragmented self so prominent in the literature of the fantastic. No dismemberment actually occurs, however; it is merely suggested metaphorically.

- 22 In much the same way, the peacock in "Feathers" goes unnamed for a dozen lines after its appearance:

It was then that we heard this awful squall. There was a baby in the house, right, but this cry was too loud for a baby.  
"What's that sound?" Fran said.  
Then something as big as a vulture flapped heavily down from one of the trees and landed just in front of the car. It shook itself. It turned its long neck towards the car, raised its head, and regarded us." (*Cathedral* 7)

- 23 This scene is realistic; it depicts the way the peacock is gradually perceived by the character. Nonetheless, the scene remains uncanny. The subjective viewpoint frames and presents the incident without the usual clichés describing the "bird of paradise" and without any supplementary clarification from the narrator. We move from "this awful squall," "this cry," and "that sound" to "something," "it," and "the thing." At last, twelve lines into the description, we find the name of this unnameable creature: "We both knew it was a peacock, sure, but we didn't say the word out loud." Why not say the name? The peacock is subsequently called "the bird" and "it." Finally, the narrator makes the following remark: "I'd have thought it was somebody dying, or else something wild and dangerous." It would seem this uncanny apparition, this thing with no name, can be evoked only by reference to the implicit. Here again we come near the gap between signifier and signified that is one of the hallmarks of modern fantastic literature. But no leap is made between them. It is up to the reader to decode the signs. Moreover, the reader will have the pleasure of pausing an instant, tempted by the mark of fatality that any object presented in its immediacy involves.
- 24 "Errand" offers a striking example of this process when Chekhov, Olga, and Dr. Schwöhrer drink the final glass of champagne. Their gestures and expressions are described, and the scene is realistic: "She arranged another pillow behind his head. Then she put the cool glass of champagne against Chekhov's palm and made sure his fingers closed around the stem. They exchanged looks – Chekhov, Olga, Dr. Schwöhrer. They didn't touch glasses. There was no toast. What on earth was there to drink to? To death? Chekhov summoned his remaining strength and said 'It's been so long since I've had champagne.' He brought the glass to his lips and drank" (520). If this scene remains etched in the reader's memory, it is doubtless because of its emotional force. (Chekhov breathes his last only two or three minutes later.) It is also because of the visual intensity and force of presence with which the narrator "sees" the scene, as if it were inevitable. Wasn't Dr. Schwöhrer's telephone call described by the narrator as "one of those rare moments of inspiration that can easily be overlooked later on, because the action is so entirely appropriate it seems inevitable" (519)? At this point we may cite the French hyperrealist painter Jean-Olivier Hucleux, who defines fatality in hyperrealist painting as "this necessity that forces one to undergo it as a whole, without those possible escapes into dream that give rise to interpretations of composition, enlargement, reduction... Fatality arises, the event is there, to the degree that a painting is specific" (Clair, "Hucleux" 16). Like the glass of champagne, the action of the narrator who at the end of "Menudo" starts to rake his lawn and then his neighbors' lawn before crossing the street is so appropriate to the situation and to his character that it seems to have a certain "fatality" about it, something that sums up the situation in an instant. Here again it is the reader who decodes and completes the text, for the narrator-character provides no key.
- 25 We might thus speak of an uncanny realism in Carver's work, much as we might say of hyperrealism that it combines familiarity and strangeness, *déjà vu* and *jamais vu*.<sup>9</sup> Seeking reality, we come up against phantasm. For all this strangeness, however, we do not go beyond the boundaries of normal life. If the reader feels any doubt, the hesitation lasts only the time it takes to find the obvious explanation or the familiar name. The reader never has to face the metonymic shift inherent in the fantastic. Instead, the reader is placed on a metaphorical level where links are established between the literal and the figurative.<sup>10</sup> In the champagne-drinking scene discussed

above, the narrator suggests just such a metaphorical connection: "What on earth was there to drink to? To death?" But such intrusions are rare in Carver's stories. As a rule, the narrator is effaced. External focalization preserves the mystery of people and things even as it safeguards realism as a way of apprehending the universe. Thus, Lloyd's temporary deafness in "Careful" must be understood on several levels, including the proverbial: No one is more deaf than he who will not hear. Similarly, the falling objects at the end of "Vitamins" recall the dripping food in the refrigerator in "Preservation": for some people, everything goes wrong. Robert's blindness in "Cathedral" is clearly metaphorical, as is the situation of Myers at the end of "The Compartment." Myers is borne off in an unknown direction in the company of short swarthy men, without coat or suitcase or anything connecting him to the carefully ordered world he has worked to build: "These days he lived alone and had little to do with anybody outside of his work. At night he listened to classical music and read books on waterfowl decoys" (*Cathedral* 48). "Chef's House" offers a final, still more subtle example. We can understand the failure of a marriage that seemed to revive under favorable circumstances only if we recognize the metaphoric implications of verb tenses in the story. For someone who experiences the situation as Wes does, the past is a trap that snaps shut on the present. And yet, having to move and change houses is an everyday occurrence. All these episodes can be called flatly realistic. They fill out the daily routines that Carver typically describes. Yet, at the same time, there is something more to each episode: a way of portraying people and things at a particular moment, of cropping or framing reality, of making us participate in the story by means of the unsaid that surprises us every time.

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- 26 In "Errand" a multiple and essentially undecidable hypotext (who can name the works it stems from?) leaves its mark on the hypertext we read. This hypertext mixes the voices and the sources of the narrative, blends biography and autobiography, the objective and the subjective. Indeed, this final text becomes a puzzle-story. In it we lose the thread of the hypotext without knowing where the break occurs or whether the thread will be taken up again later, for instance, in the final lines. Strangely enough, the second narrative does not follow the expected outline and is not developed as an independent narrative. It appears, rather, as an imaginary outgrowth of the first narrative, whose insufficiencies it is supposed to remedy. Real and fictional then become interchangeable concepts depending on the narrative level, which may develop or equally well degenerate. And yet writing or telling a story cannot be everything and anything. Chekhov the man (or Olga Knipper the woman) is one thing; Chekhov the writer is another. Even though Chekhov's name does not appear in the story's title, it is surely he who inspires the uncanny ending.
- 27 This homage to Chekhov, who died of tuberculosis, by a writer who died of lung cancer in August 1988, not long after having written "Errand" (first published in the *New Yorker* of 1 June 1987) assumes a special place in Carver's works. Located at the end of his last collection, "Errand" stands as his literary testament. (The story's sophisticated narrative technique, something seldom seen in Carver's work, is another sign of its distinctiveness.) A writer writes a story about another writer whom he considers his master and from whom he learned to write. What could be the subject of such a story *except* the process of writing and the nature of the realism that links the two writers in

the same tradition? In the end, all this can be summed up in a champagne cork. Corks that fall on the floor are there to be picked up, as everyone knows, particularly a neatly dressed young bellboy. But why focus on a champagne cork when Chekhov has just died? Such is life. Reality is everywhere. Above all, it is where we least expect to find it.

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## NOTES

1. Gérard Genette calls the hypertext any text derived from a previous one by transformation or imitation. This previous text is called the hypotext (*Palimpsestes* 14).
2. When a narrative is embedded in another narrative, it may be said to unfold on a second level. This second-level narrative is produced by a narrator who is already a character in the first, or primary, narrative. Genette also distinguishes between heterodiegetic and homodiegetic, intradiegetic and extradiegetic narrators. The narrator of "Errand" is extradiegetic (external to the diegesis) as well as heterodiegetic (in that he does not tell his own story). At the end of the story, Olga Knipper becomes an intradiegetic narrator (as a narrator she is part of the diegesis, a

character in the framing narrative) and a heterodiegetic narrator. See Figures III 238-59. Instead of narrative levels, Gerald Prince speaks of diegetic levels in *A Dictionary of Narratology*.

3. The narrator's comment about the basis of Suvorin and Chekhov's friendship ("Like Chekhov, he was the grandson of a serf. They had that in common: each had peasant's blood in his veins" [Where 512]), derives from a remark made by Chekhov himself: "There is peasant blood in my veins and you cannot astonish me with peasant virtues" (O'Faolain 100).

4. The color yellow has dual significance. According to Chevalier and Gheerbrant, yellow is "the most divine of colors but also the most earthly" (535-37).

5. This distinction calls to mind the opposition between the man and the artist that was so dear to Henry James. In "The Private Life," for example, the writer Clare Wawdrey plays a double role: mediocre presence and vital absence, while Lord Mellifont lives wholly in his public life and possesses no private life.

6. Several critics have noted the presence of the uncanny in Carver's stories. Irving Howe writes, "There are artists who reach the strange by staying with the ordinary" (1), and Richard Eder observes, "Carver is more than a realist: there is, in some of the stories, a strangeness, the husk of a myth" (3). These critics, however, are more concerned with the content of Carver's stories than with the way realism and the uncanny are connected.

7. For essential elements of this discussion I have drawn on the work of Jan Leering.

8. In an interview, Carver recalls what prompted him to write the story "Fat." The story began with an anecdote told to him by his wife: "But I didn't do anything with the story for years and then it came time to write the story and it was a question of how best to tell it, whose story it was. Then I made a conscious decision how to present the story, and I decided to tell it from the point of view of the woman, the waitress, and frame the story as if she were telling it to her girlfriend. She can't quite make sense of the story herself, all of the feelings that she experienced, but she goes ahead and tells it anyway" (Applefield 211).

9. Cf. Jean Clair: "The ambiguity of hyperrealism may lie in the fact that it plays on an ambivalence between the 'already seen' and the 'never seen.' What is represented to the eye is always the already known, the everyday familiar image. At the same time, however, it is also something that has never before been recognized as such. In a single stroke the object presents itself in its greatest familiarity and its most disturbing strangeness, its immediacy and its remoteness" ("L'adorable" 4).

10. I have borrowed this formula and the preceding references to fantastic themes from Rosemary Jackson (41-42).

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## ABSTRACTS

Claudine Verley is professor emerita of American literature at the Université de Poitiers, where she directed CERER (Centre de Recherche sur les Représentations du Réel). Her publications on Raymond Carver include two essays in *JSSE*, a special issue *Profils Américains*, and two books: *Raymond Carver: des nouvelles du monde* and *Short cuts: Raymond Carver/Robert Altman*.

"Errand" has much more to do with Chekhov as a writer than with his last days and death. Everything in Carver's last story revolves around the notion of realism. From the objective biographical data of the implicit hypotext to the subjectively determined fictive hypertext, the shift is sometimes puzzling. Excisions, extensions, and the addition of more and more detailed

imaginary episodes make it difficult to discriminate between the reality of Chekhov's life and the fiction in the story. And when a character becomes the narrator of an imaginary second narrative that reshuffles the items of the first narrative, readers no longer know whether the created scene in the present tense has come to "real" life or whether they are being deceived by the staging of a fake reality. The Chekhovian bellboy will have the last word as he bends over to retrieve the cork of the champagne bottle. His ordinary everyday gesture, delineated and framed as in a superrealist painting, appears inevitable.