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Negative Pastoral: The Art of Raymond Carver's Stories

WHAT FIRST ATTRACTS us to a new writer? A new accent, a new way of seeing the world; but not just new. Dr Johnson's definition of wit, correcting Pope's 'What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed', is difficult to better: wit is that 'which is at once natural and new, that which, though not obvious, is upon its first production, acknowledged to be just, that, which he that never found it, wonders how he missed.'¹ And part of the newness will also be the sense of a new area of attention, what Eliot called new 'objects, new groups of objects, new feelings and aspects'.²

Raymond Carver's stories give us both this sense of a new language and new objects and feelings. but they impress the more deeply because they also strike us as familiar, recognisable. We may or may not have had experience of Carver's locality (mainly western America, Oregon and California) or of his people (blue-collar workers, the unemployed, alcoholics, baffled and inarticulate wives and husbands, a variety of no-hopers and dead-enders) but when we meet them we recognise them, they are us. As Carver himself said of the stories of a friend and fellow writer: he 'has somehow gotten his hands on our shared secrets, and he's out to tell us everything he knows.'³

I want to look at Carver's stories under the heading of pastoral because it seems to me a way of focusing on their simplicity and their centrality. Pastoral traditionally takes the lives of the lowest social classes – originally shepherds and country labourers – and finds in them fundamental forms of human nature and behaviour. The term applies to Carver because his

¹ Samuel Johnson, 'Life of Cowley'

² In writing of Swinburne's language, Eliot wrote 'But the language which is more important to us is that which is struggling to digest and express new objects' etc., 'Swinburne as Poet', *The Sacred Wood*, p 150

³ Raymond Carver on Tobias Wolff's *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*, quoted on the back cover

characters are generally working class, and because they are preoccupied with the simplest elements of life – food, drink, work, relationships – in a way that is highly circumscribed by their limitations. The world of reflection and articulation is largely denied them. Their culture consists mainly of television and drinking. Yet their lives are not completely ‘unexamined’ (‘The unexamined life is not worth living’) their dissatisfaction, their frequent unease, is a kind of examination – and necessarily, because of their limitations, an examination of fundamentals. Often at the ends of their tethers they feel thereby the things that hold them back, or hold them in, or hold them up. Because they do not divert themselves with the sophisticated attractions of art or ideas, they come up the more painfully against the baffling question of what they are doing and why. One idea of pastoral, as William Empson has put it, is that ‘you can say everything about complex people by a complete consideration of simple people’⁴ ‘Everything’ may be overstating the case and the terms ‘simple’ and ‘complex’ demand in practice frequent reversals and transvaluations. But the idea still gets somewhere near the heart of the matter. By simplifying you see certain, often complex, things more clearly.

Wordsworth’s justification for the subject matter of *Lyrical Ballads* may, *via* a certain obliquity, get us a little further towards a definition of pastoral which, like Carver’s, aims also at a kind of realism.

Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are under less restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language, because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable, and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.

(Wordsworth, preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800)

To invoke Wordsworth on the value of rustic life as a literary subject as part of an attempt to define the art Raymond Carver might seem like a simple irony. You find ‘humble life’ in Carver but ‘the essential passions of the heart’, speaking ‘a plainer and more emphatic language’,

⁴ William Empson, quoted in *The Penguin Book of Pastoral Verse*, ed John Barrell and John Bull, p 14

forcible communication, and an incorporation of the 'passions' with 'the beautiful and permanent forms of nature'? Where in Carver's bleak, banal, largely urban world, with its lost, dazed, inarticulate characters, and its tawdry physical settings, do you find these? But Wordsworth's own characters are, of course, no idyllic 'rustics', and his 'essential passions' are found in the strangest and most extreme conditions. And at the root of Carver's power as a writer, I am suggesting, there is also a central concern with the fundamentals of human behaviour, focused with such force precisely because of the odd corners in which these fundamentals are found, and the flat and oblique mode of vision which contemplates them.

Carver's openings establish that mode of vision with paradoxical immediacy which is never far from comedy: they take us into a world which is either strange or banal, or both at the same time. And the banality comes to seem as arresting as the strangeness.

That morning she pours Teacher's over my belly and licks it off
That afternoon she tries to jump out of the window

I go, 'Holly, this can't continue. This has got to stop.'

('Gazebo', *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, 1981)

My husband eats with a good appetite. But I don't think he's really hungry. He chews, arms on the table, and stares at something across the room. He looks at me and looks away. He wipes his mouth on the napkin. He shrugs, and goes on eating.

('So much water so close to home', *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, 1981)

The telephone rang while he was running the vacuum cleaner. He had worked his way through the apartment and was doing the living room, using the nozzle attachment to get at the cat hairs between the cushions. He stopped and listened and then switched off the vacuum. He went to answer the telephone.

('Put yourself in my shoes', *Will You Please be Quiet Please*, 1976)

These examples are taken more or less randomly from two of the three volumes of stories republished in *The Stories of Raymond Carver* (Picador, 1985). The matter is ungainsayably banal: to the reader of Carver they hold out immense promise, just as the first line of the last example held out promise for Carver.

I once sat down to write what turned out to be a pretty good story, though only the first sentence of the story had offered itself to me when I began it. For several days I'd been going around with this sentence in my head. 'He was running the vacuum cleaner when the telephone rang' I knew there was a story there and that it wanted telling. I felt it in my bones, that a story belonged with that beginning, if I could just have time to write it. I found the time, an entire day – twelve, fifteen hours even – if I wanted to make use of it. I did, and I sat down in the morning and wrote the first sentence, and other sentences promptly began to attach themselves. I made the story just as I'd make a poem, one line, and then the next, and the next. Pretty soon I could see a story, and I knew it was my story, the one I'd been wanting to write.

(‘On Writing’, *Fires* 1985)

The style of the stories is plain, colloquial, but not especially slangy – plain, standard American. One reviewer called it ‘terse, harsh, meat-and-potato words’ – it is terse, if not especially harsh except where necessary, but ‘meat-and-potato’ is apt, suggesting the day-to-day nature of the stories, a certain surface monotony, a nutritive quality, and, perhaps unintentionally – fitting the way food looms large in the world of Carver’s characters – a preoccupation with food, and even more, drink. There is a kind of low-key, almost weary tone to the narrations, whether in the third person (as in about two thirds of Carver’s stories) or the first. It’s the kind of tone in which someone might tell a story to a friend in a bar. There is the sense that these are stories anyone might tell anyone in the day-to-day process of common human interchange, storytelling as a basic mode of communication and way of talking about and making sense of life.

The feeling of strangeness can make itself felt gradually, or at the very outset. In the second story cited above, after an opening page describing an unexplained confrontation between the woman and her husband the woman narrator goes on to tell the story of a fishing expedition her husband went on with three other ‘family men’. When they reached the remote river they discovered a dead, naked girl, wedged in some branches in the water. One of the men said they should start back at once, but the others ‘pleaded fatigue, the late hour, the fact the girl wasn’t going anywhere’. They built a fire, drank whiskey, secured the body to a tree so it didn’t drift away, slept, and next morning they ate and fished and drank whiskey. Then they packed up and drove to a telephone, and waited to give their statements. The story turns on the wife’s reaction to the men’s unthinking callousness. In the opening scene she does not rebuke her husband explicitly, but stares at him as she washes up, and replies

'You know' when he says 'Tell me what I did wrong and I'll listen — I won't have you passing judgement. Do you hear?', and 'That's the point' when he says 'But she was dead.' At the end of the scene, as her husband sits reading the newspaper with the story on the front page, 'I close my eyes and hold on to the sink. Then I rake my arm across the drainboard and send the dishes to the floor.' Later in the story she remembers a girl who was murdered in her home town when she was a girl; she gets her hair done and drives to the present dead girl's funeral, on the way she is disturbed by the attentions of a truckdriver as she is parked by the side of the road, hearing 'the river down below the trees'. Later she drives out with her husband to a picnic ground near a large pond. 'I can see the men out there. I can see them out there fishing / So much water so close to home. / I say, why did you have to go miles away?' / 'Don't rile me,' he says. After the funeral she comes home, and for a moment thinks something has happened to Dean, her son, then her husband says 'I think I know what you need' and they begin to make love. The story ends

'First things first,' he says.

He says something else. But I don't need to listen. I can't hear a thing with so much water going

'That's right,' I say, finishing the buttons myself. 'Before Dean comes. Hurry.'

In this story the focus of vision is normative — that is to say the narrator provides the moral perspective which registers the unthinkingness and enormity of the men's behaviour. At the same time she is not especially articulate towards her husband or even in her own mind. A tension is set up between her desire to register some protest and even to expiate something, and her need to go on loving her husband and to go on maintaining the habits and procedures of her daily life. In an earlier, longer version of the story, she is more explicit in her condemnation of her husband. She locks herself in the spare room, and at the end she resists his sexual advances: the last line of the story is her on the phone to him at work saying 'For God's sake, Stuart, she was only a child.'⁵ Both versions dramatise a tension between moral consciousness and the dulling effects of habit and human need, but in the second pared-down version, need and habit are given the final emphasis.

⁵ The three different published versions of this story are discussed, along with the question of other of Carver's revisions, by Adam Meyer, 'Now You See Him, Now You Don't, Now You Do Again: The Evolution of Raymond Carver's Minimalism', *Critique*, Vol. 30 No. 4, Summer 1989, pp. 239–51.



In stories like the one just discussed, some strange or extreme event impinges on everyday banality and exposes the moral flaw lurking beneath the banal surface, or a condition of powerlessness or lack of identity. The latter is explored, for instance, in 'Collectors', in which a vacuum salesman demonstrates his wares to the narrator on the strength of a free-offer to a woman at the same address, and then walks off with a letter which he says is addressed to her. Different kinds of dispossession are examined in 'Viewfinder' about a man abandoned by his family, which begins 'A man without hands came to the door to sell me a photograph of my house', and ends three pages later with the narrator calling to be photographed as he throws rocks down from his roof. In 'Neighbours' a couple who are house-minding for their neighbours in the apartment across the hall get drawn in to transvestite and fetishistic fantasies during their visits to the apartment. This is the bizarre side to Carver's imagination, and it is there to some degree, however slight, in almost all his stories. It is an aspect of negative pastoral in that the plain 'humble' protagonists lead a life of simplicity and uneventfulness and which is twisted by bizarre events into a situation which is far from universal, but which obliquely suggests 'essential passions' (in this case the longing to escape limitation, to be someone else), passions twisted into strange and contorted expression.

In other stories the ordinariness, the lack of event, is seemingly unrelieved. In 'What's in Alaska?' Carl buys some new shoes, goes home, drinks some beer, his wife Mary talks about the offer of a job in Alaska, they visit friends, Jack and Helen, to try out their new water-pipe (for marijuana), eat cream sodas and potato chips and M and M's and popsicles, and talk about Alaska, cream soda is spilled on Carl's new shoes, the cat comes in with a dead mouse, they go home, drink beer, the wife takes a sleeping pill and goes to sleep after repeating a phrase spoken earlier, 'What's in Alaska?'. Her husband is left awake, watching something, 'a pair of small eyes', he thinks he sees in the hall. 'He waited for it to move once more, to make the slightest noise.' The notation of this story is so slight that it scarcely offers a prompting for interpretation, scarcely seems a 'story' at all. Wordsworth in a similar situation would pause before the end of 'Simon Lee' to say

What more I have to say is short,
And you must kindly take it
It is no tale, but should you think,
Perhaps a tale you'll make it

And then of course at the end he comes close to pointing a moral, though we still have to think through the relation of the moral to the story to feel the full significance of the 'tale' Carver, writing after Joyce and Hemingway and modernist and postmodernist experiment, doesn't have to urge his reader in this way. But the reader, baffled and intrigued by the seemingly random events of the story, is drawn to ask why his attention has been held, to piece together the story's connections and infer its significance.

In this case, as in many of the stories, the casual title phrase is of course a central clue. In the middle of some marijuana-induced laughter and talk about getting another bottle of cream soda Carl says 'We might go to Alaska'.

'Alaska?' Jack said 'What's in Alaska? What would you do up there?'

'I wish we could go someplace,' Helen said

'What's wrong with here?' Jack said. 'What would you guys do in Alaska? I'm serious. I'd like to know.'

Carl put a potato chip in his mouth and sipped his cream soda 'I don't know. What did you say?'

After a while Jack said, 'What's in Alaska?'

As often in Carver's stories (and elsewhere in modern American literature, particularly in writers with whom Carver has been associated, like Richard Ford or Tobias Wolff) the characters are always looking towards or moving off to or just arrived from an elsewhere, usually somewhere else in the States, where things might go better or where they went badly. In this case the impulse seems especially unfocused. Mary's offer of a job in Alaska (which would presumably necessitate a big move, Carl finding another job etc) plays a smaller part in their thoughts and conversation than Carl's new shoes or the junk food they take to and eat at Jack and Helen's ('At the check-out counter he added a handful of U-No bars to the order / "Hey, yeah," she said when she saw them'). Mary teases Carl for being gloomy ('on a bummer', as she puts it): he denies it, but when soda is spilled on his new shoes, his bummer gets worse. Alaska slips in and out of the conversation, with Carl getting more negative.

'What *about* Alaska, you guys?' Jack said

'There's nothing in Alaska,' Carl said

'He's on a bummer,' Mary said.

'What'll you guys *do* in Alaska?' Jack said

'There's nothing to do in Alaska,' Carl said. He put his feet under the coffee table. Then he moved them out under the light once more.

'Who wants a new pair of shoes?' Carl said.

The comedy (one notices more on successive readings) lightly registers the conflict between earnestness (an essential feature of many Carver characters, and one might say very American) and vacuity. But it also introduces an absurd but real hint of menace in the comic cat and its dead mouse ('"Did you see what I just saw?"' Mary said. "'Talk about a bummer"'') which leads back to talk of Alaska ('"Mary and Carl said they're going to Alaska. Cindy's got to learn to hunt"'') and this links up with the last paragraph of the story ('Just as he started to turn off the lamp he thought he heard something in the hall . . . etc.'). Behind the vacuous lack of focus on the possible change in their lives there is both a longing and a kind of anxiety. The question 'What's in Alaska?' gets no answer, conjuring only in the end a vast emptiness, symptomatic of a moral emptiness which is disturbed only by a nagging intimation of death, the (imagined?) glimpse of 'a pair of small eyes.'

* * *

Carver's method can be called negative, in the way he focuses on the mundane, the seemingly trivial, and through that suggests the bigger issues. His style is almost completely unadorned by metaphor or other figure of speech, and he does not use obvious symbolism, which would state or embody the meaning too directly. Wolfgang Iser has used the term 'negativity' in this sense in *The Act of Reading*.

Meaning emerges as the reverse side of what the text had depicted. The world of the text usually appears in a state of alienation, and this alienation effect indicates that the meaning is potentially there, awaiting redemption from its potentiality. It would be impossible for language to formulate both the deformation of human situations and the remedy in one and the same instant. Therefore, language can never explicitly state the meaning, it can only make itself felt by way of the apparent deformation and distortions which the formulated text reveals. Hence meaning coincides with the reverse side of the represented text.⁶

⁶ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 229.

A problem with Iser's notion here is that he seems to be applying it to all fiction. But while negativity of this kind may to some extent be present in any fictional text which does not (as most do not) actually state its meaning, it would hardly seem to apply to texts (e.g. *Rasselas* or *Hard Times*) in which strong positive values are directly embodied. But it is certainly suggestive in relation to fiction like Carver's (or in a different way, Beckett's, on whom Iser has also written). Marc Chenetier has brought this out illuminatingly in an article on Carver, where he cites part of the passage quoted above, and relates it to the question of metaphor, saying that it can be seen 'either as ally or enemy of negativity.'⁷ This is because metaphor can either be seen as part of the necessary distortion of literal meaning or as a premature attempt to 'translate' experience into meaning. With Carver, metaphor would seem to be seen in the second way, and hence avoided.

But if he avoids metaphor and what one might call romantic symbolism, because of its charged, mysterious and transcendental nature (like, in their different ways, Lawrence's *St Mawr* or Virginia Woolf's lighthouse), Carver's literal, or metonymic technique (in which elements in the fiction relate to each other along the syntagmatic axis, or axis of the narrative, rather than relating outwards to 'universal' meanings)⁸ also develops a kind of symbolism, a sense of objects or events or phrases as evoking particular condition and a larger meaning. In 'The Bridle', for instance, the object of the title is a mere detail in the overall narrative of the story. The narrator and her husband are apartment managers. A family called Holits move into an apartment unloading with their other stuff 'something that has straps hanging from it. It takes a minute, but then I figure out it's a bridle.' The narrator is also a hairdresser and does Holits's wife's hair, and the wife begins to unburden her problems: Holits had bought a racehorse and had lost money, the family depends on her waitress job. Late one night Holits and some other tenants are fooling around the pool. Holits tries to jump from the roof of the cabana and 'hits the deck.' Thereafter he 'acts like I'm a stranger' and after a week or so the family move out. They leave behind the bridle. The story ends.

⁷ Marc Chenetier, 'Living On/Off the "Reserve", Performance, Interrogation, and Negativity in the Works of Raymond Carver', in *Critical Angles: European Views of Contemporary American Literature*, ed. Chenetier, p. 186.

⁸ See Roman Jakobson's seminal essay 'The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles', Chapter 5 of *Fundamentals of Language* (Jakobson and Morris Halle, 1956), and frequently reprinted, e.g. in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams, pp. 1113-17.

'Bridle,' I say I hold it up to the window and look at it in the light. It's not fancy, it's just an old dark leather bridle I don't know much about them. But I know that one part of it fits in the mouth. That part's called the bit It's made of steel Reins go over the head and up to where they're held on the neck between the fingers. The rider pulls the horse this way and that, and the horse turns. It's simple The bit's heavy and cold If you had to wear this thing between your teeth, I guess you'd catch on in a hurry. When you felt it pull, you'd know it was time You'd know you were going somewhere.

The point of the story cannot be contained entirely in its central object, but that object serves as a kind of focus The narrator's good sense, her taking the main responsibility for the apartments while her husband drinks and watches T V., her delicacy as she manicures Holits's wife and the sympathy which draws the latter out, all evoke human values despite her limited range of understanding and expression ('I can't think of anything else either', 'I don't know what to make of it', 'I don't know why this is', 'I think so anyway' such expressions recur) Her sense of the solidity, the restraining power, the discipline and the purposiveness of the bridle at the end of the story is a kind of realisation, and focuses both her qualities and our sense of the human aimlessness and quiet despair which the story embodies and puts in perspective.

But it would be a mistake to put too strong or too premature a stress on the positive moral realisations, however obliquely or negatively arrived at, in Carver's stories The experience of reading Carver is initially one simply of being drawn into a densely real material and human world through a narrative tone and procedure that seem to focus only on the most basic and mundane things Adam Mars-Jones wrote in a review that Carver's stories were written in 'a narrative voice that seems to come from the furniture', and this was intended as praise Carver seems to get down to a bedrock, a lowest common denominator of sensibility which through the art of his handling can be made to reveal a whole world, and what is more the 'world which is the world/Of all of us' (Wordsworth),⁹ or as one reviewer put it 'We would not want to live there But we do ' This world from the very beginnings of the stories is at once strange and familiar We are strangers, but the assumption is that we will recognise at the very outset its topography and its characters ('The call had come an hour ago when they were eating Two men were shooting on Lee Waite's part of Toppenish Creek, down below the bridge on the Cowiche Road') - ('Sixty Acres'), the stories need to be read slowly, even to be read

⁹ *The Prelude* (1850) XI, pp 142-3

aloud, and they induce us to do so. As Graham Clarke has written, 'in coming to Carver we should not read his stories so much as a story: one at a time, inching along the prose in order to take its exact measurement.'¹⁰ One of the lacks of much criticism of Carver hitherto (to which Clarke's essay is a notable exception) is its lack of the power of quotation: as with any first-rate writer, only in Carver's own prose can we really contemplate the object we are discussing

* * *

The fact that Carver seems in an important sense on a level with his characters, as well as being able to throw light on them and therefore in one aspect 'superior' to them, comes no doubt in large part from the fact that he is depicting what appears to have been very much his own world and his own experience. And yet it is a measure of the stories' success that this fact does not diminish our sense of their independent artistic realisation. His father had moved from Arkansas to Washington State, hitching and riding in boxcars, looking for work, which he found variously as an applepicker, a construction worker on the Grand Coulee Dam and eventually as a saw filer in a sawmill. When the young Raymond Carver was eighteen his sixteen-year-old girlfriend became pregnant and he married her the following year. To keep his young family he took various jobs as a hospital porter, a dictionary salesman, a petrol station attendant and a delivery man. Eventually he attended Chico State College in northern California and studied creative writing with the novelist and short story writer John Gardner. He suffered severely from alcoholism and after several separations his first wife left him in 1977. In 1976 his first book, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*² was published and he began to be more widely known. In 1977 he met Tess Gallagher, the writer, and lived with her for eleven years. They got married in June 1988, less than two months before his death in August 1988.¹¹

There appears to be a correlation between the chronology of his life and of his works, most of the stories about unemployment, for instance, come in his first volume (1976), though the subject recurs in *Cathedral* (1984). Most of the stories about broken marriages occur in the second

¹⁰ Graham Clarke, 'Investing the Glimpse Raymond Carver and the Syntax of Silence', in *New American Writing Essays on American Literature Since 1970*, ed Clarke, p 120

¹¹ Biographical details mainly from Carver's 'My Father's Life' and 'Fires' in *Fires Essays, Poems, Stories*, Picador, and the note on the author in Carver's *Elephant*

volume (1981), though one of the best, 'Blackbird Pie', comes in the fourth volume, *Elephant* (1988). It would of course be naive to assume an exact correlation: a painful topic might well surface years later when it could at last be handled properly. But it is certainly true that certain longer, more expansive and 'optimistic' stories, as critics have pointed out, began to appear in *Cathedral* (like the title story, or the longer, less harsh and more humane version of 'The Bath' (1981), retitled 'A Small, Good Thing').¹² In *Elephant*, too, there is evidence of a new scope and complexity in the stories: a new non-American terrain in the story about Chekhov's death, 'Errand', and a subtle deployment of ideas and (for the first time, I think) a complex irony, in 'Blackbird Pie'.¹³ So the sense of Carver's being on the level with his characters has this autobiographical dimension. But there is also the neutral tone, the detachment of vision, the humour which, though not quite irony, comes out as a kind of deadpan wryness, the kind of awareness of his characters that a perceptive man would have of himself.

This too is conducive to pastoral. In reading Carver we have a curious double sense of both the material solidity of the vision, preoccupied as it is with eating, drinking, working, not working, sex, physical being; and of the limitations of this life and how it is perhaps only really kept alive by intimations of something beyond these things – imagination, aspiration, things which are only perceived in glimpses or felt as absences. There is frequently a kind of stoicism in the characters, locked in their limitations but keeping going on the meagre energy and vision allowed them, a quality which has something admirable about it, admirable because of a certain dogged sincerity and lack of duplicity. There is a sense that the writer and in consequence the reader are both superior and inferior to these characters, in the sense Empson spoke of when he saw the 'double feeling of pastoral' in Milton's imagination of Adam.¹⁴ Insofar as the reader has a privileged 'knowing' perspective on the characters, he loses something of their innocence. The great difference of course is that, as Empson notes, Milton had to see Adam from a great distance, whereas Carver manages this double feeling towards his characters at much closer quarters, so that we may hardly be aware of a

¹² See e.g. Meyer, *op. cit.*, also William C. Stull, 'Beyond Hopelessville: Another Side to Raymond Carver', *Philological Quarterly*, Vol. 64, 1985, pp. 1–15; Nelson Hathcock, 'The Possibility of Resurrection in "Feathers" and "Cathedral"', *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 23, No. 1, Winter 1991, pp. 31–41.

¹³ John Harvey, in a review of *Elephant* in *The Sunday Telegraph* (14 August 1988), described 'Blackbird Pie' as 'perhaps [Carver's] masterpiece'.

¹⁴ William Empson, 'Double Plots' in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), pp. 180–81.

privileged position at all Carver's characters also have something of that 'independence' in their limitations which Empson identified as one of the qualities of pastoral characters; in Carver's case it probably has something particularly American about it it could be seen as descending from the puritan tradition of being alone with your conscience, now a free agent where God has disappeared; or as an aspect of democracy in America ('It's a free country' is a cliché that springs to the lips of more than one character in the stories).

* * *

One obvious aspect of traditional pastoral which Carver explores, less often than urban life but still significantly, whether as the focus of a story or as a glimpsed background, is rural life itself Not many of the characters work or live in the country, but hunting (usually duck-shooting) and fishing or the possession of stock or land are a recurring element in the stories (and fishing was a constant resource in Carver's life, and a powerful source of images in his poems) These occupations (they seem more than just 'sports') seem often to provide a kind of escape or to keep the characters in touch with a more natural world They are an exercise of a primitive ability to survive in harsh conditions, and give many characters an experience of power, at least in principle, over nature The Hemingway tradition is clearly apparent here.¹⁵ In practice, however, this power is usually seen as severely curtailed or undermined. In 'The third thing that killed my father off' the failure of this power is the focus of tragedy The father of the narrator encourages a slow and simple-minded friend, Dummy, to stock his pond with bass. The bass arrive in barrels by Parcel Post.

The barrel inside was wrapped in burlap, and there were these nickel-sized holes in the lid They raised it off and Dummy aimed his flashlight in

It looked like a million bass fingerlings were finning inside It was the strangest sight, all those living things busy in there, like a little ocean that had come on the train

¹⁵ Graham Clarke has made a detailed and interesting comparison, particularly relevant to the notion of pastoral, between Hemingway's 'Big Two-Hearted River' stories and Carver's 'The Cabin' (in *Fires*, op cit), a story originally entitled 'Pastoral' (in *Furious Seasons*) See Clarke, op cit , pp 108-11

The possession of the bass comes to be felt as the possession of a vital natural life and power, a strange submission of nature to man

Dad motioned to me and dropped to a crouch. I dropped too. He was peering into the water in front of us, and when I looked, I saw what had taken him so

‘Honest to God,’ he whispered

A school of bass was cruising, twenty, thirty, not one of them under two pounds. They veered off, and then they shifted and came back, so densely spaced they looked like they were bumping up against each other. I could see their big, heavy-lidded eyes watching us as they went by. They flashed away again, and again they came back.

They were asking for it. It didn’t make any difference if we stayed squatted or stood up. The fish didn’t think a thing about us. I tell you, it was a sight to behold.

When the boy narrator catches one of the bass after a stirring contest, Dummy insists they throw it back. In February the river floods, and Dummy’s pond and bass are washed away. The narrator goes to see, and catches sight of Dummy.

It scared me, seeing him. I motioned to the other fellows, and we all got down.

Dummy was standing at the far side of the pond near where the water was rushing out. He was just standing there, the saddest man I ever saw.

The boy hears later that Dummy is acting strangely, missing work, ‘“going off the deep end,”’ Dad said’. Then they hear that Dummy has killed his wife with a hammer and drowned himself.

The angle of vision in this story, with the boy narrator, intensifies the sense of wonder and of horror, and also the sense of simple minds (the boy’s and his father’s) trying to come to terms with tragedy and an obscure sense of guilt and responsibility. In a brief final paragraph we learn that ‘everything took a bad turn for my father after that. . . . But as I said, Pearl Harbor and having to move back to his dad’s place didn’t do my dad one bit of good, either.’

In another story, the pastoral element is more positive. ‘Nobody said anything’ is about a young teenage boy who goes off fishing when he is supposed to be resting ill at home. He is given a lift by a woman and fantasizes about sexual relations with her. When he gets to the fishing creek he meets a younger boy and together they land a big fish in a chaotic

struggle, stunning it in the shallow creek and scooping it out of the water. They argue about who is to have the fish and in the end cut it in half. The narrator takes his half (the head) home to his parents who are arguing again as in the opening scene of the story. The excitement of the catch, and the vividly described struggle give the story a heroic feel, despite the tawdry surroundings and the messy squabble of the boys. The sense of the narrator's awaking independence and adventurousness is plainly but unobtrusively linked to his growing sexuality, not through metaphor or any artful obliquities, but simply through the feeling generated by the actuality of the boy's voice and the contiguity of the physical sensations.

I felt lousy to have come this far up for nothing. I pulled out all kinds of line this time and made another cast. I laid the fly rod over a limb and lit the next to last weed. I looked up the valley and began to think about the woman. We were going to her house because she wanted help carrying in the groceries. Her husband was overseas. I touched her and she started shaking. We were French-kissing on the couch when she excused herself to go to the bathroom. I followed her. I watched as she pulled down her pants and sat on the toilet. I had a big boner and she waved me over with her hand. Just as I was going to unzip, I heard a plop in the creek. I looked and saw the tip of my fly rod jiggling.

The facts of the narrative, the continuity of inner consciousness and outward perceptions – metonymy rather than metaphor – are enough to build up gradually a sense of life and of interrelated parts of experience. There is a keenness of apprehension of physical life, a sense of rawness in the boy's perception, and the descriptions of the fish and the (very coarse) fishing are sharp and invigorating. Once again one has to go to the end of Carver's story, and to quote it, to get any sense of the effect and the point. There is an extraordinary effect of fullness and a kind of revelation of life in the culmination of the story, despite the half fish and the compromised triumph. The boy confronts his father, but with the excitement of discovery and achievement.

I said, 'It's a gigantic summer steelhead from Birch Creek. Look! Isn't he something? It's a monster! I chased him up and down the creek like a madman!' My voice was crazy. But I could not stop. 'There was another one, too,' I hurried on. 'A green one. I swear! It was green! Have you ever seen a green one?'

He looked into the creel and his mouth fell open.

He screamed, 'Take that goddam thing out of here! What in the hell is the matter with you? Take it the hell out of the kitchen and throw it in the goddam garbage!'

I went back outside. I looked into the creel. What was there looked silver under the porch light. What was there filled the creel.

I lifted him out. I held him. I held that half of him.

Negative pastoral in Carver (here in the tawdry setting, the negative family emotions) is often a way of suggesting, or as here reaching through to positive feelings (and not only in the later stories like 'Cathedral' or 'A small, good thing', which critics have tended to seize on to mark a shift in Carver's later work). It is not so much the rural aspect of country life, but what goes on in it, which is Carver's subject in his rural stories (as, indeed, it was Wordsworth's in *Lyrical Ballads*). In one story indeed, he seems to examine the conventional notion of the pastoral life for the writer in the twentieth century – the retreat to the country – in a way that rejects that way of life but does so by evoking it as a kind of standard. In 'How about this?' Harry, 'a writer in a way, but . . . also an actor and musician' drives with his wife to a remote farmhouse in Western Washington which belonged to her father. The idea is that they may decide to move out there, and the impulse is the classic impulse of pastoral. 'At first he wasn't too clear about where he wanted to go; he just knew he wanted to leave the city and start over again. A simpler life was what he had in mind, just the essentials he said.' But from the very opening paragraph of the story as they drive through the pastureland 'the optimism was gone now.' When they get to the house they look round it, uneasily sounding out each other's feelings about living there: the wife is ready but doesn't want to pressure him. In the kitchen they find 'a wood stove and a mattress pushed against one wall.' Harry is attracted by the traditional elements of pastoral, but in a way that suggests residues of uncertainty.

They walked toward the barn, stopping to inspect the withered apple trees. He broke off one of the small dry branches, turned it over and over in his hands while she stood beside him and smoked a cigarette. It *was* peaceful, more or less appealing country, and he thought it pleasant to feel that something permanent, really permanent might belong to him. He was taken by a sudden affection for the little orchard.

The stress on '*was*', the 'more or less' and the 'thought it pleasant to feel' (rather than just 'felt it pleasant') carry an undertone of doubt which

suggests an element of self-consciousness, of standing apart from his own feeling, undertones typical of Carver's plain, sensitively registering prose. And as we are beginning to predict, Harry's ultimate feeling is negative. Walking in nearby woods a little later on.

He suddenly recalled the mattress in the kitchen. He understood that it made him afraid. He tried to imagine Emily walking the big rafter in the barn [a childhood exploit she has told him of]. But that made him afraid too. He smoked. He felt very calm really, all things considered. He wasn't going to stay here, he knew that, but it didn't upset him to know that now.

The detail of the mattress is slight but telling: presumably it suggests isolation and the possibility of dereliction, just as Emily's exploit suggests precariousness. A moment later he meets Emily round the corner of the house doing cartwheels, and the story ends with this sequence:

She raised herself onto the balls of her feet, arms out to the sides over her head, and then pitched forward. She turned two more cartwheels while he watched, and then she called, 'How about *this!*' She dropped lightly onto her hands and, getting her balance, began a shaky hesitant movement in his direction. Face flushed, blouse hanging over her chin, legs waving insanely, she advanced on him.

'Have you decided?' she said, quite breathless.

He nodded.

'So?' she said. She let herself fall against her shoulder and rolled onto her back, covering her eyes from the sun with an arm as if to uncover her breasts.

She said, 'Harry.'

He was reaching to light a cigaret with his last match when his hands began to tremble. The match went out, and he stood there, holding the empty matchbook and the cigaret, staring at the vast expanse of trees at the end of the bright meadow.

'Harry, we have to love each other,' she said. 'We'll just have to love each other.'

The presumed resolution and poise Harry had achieved a few lines before ('He would be alright, he decided. He was only thirty-two. Not so old. He was, for the moment, in a spot, he could admit that') is disrupted by his wife's burst of youthful energy and her renewed question. The 'vast expanse of trees at the end of the bright meadow' is a kind of

touchstone of naturalness and beauty, but also of potentially intimidating space, from which he feels excluded. Emily's final line could make this story into Carver's version of 'Dover Beach'; one in which the pastoral experiment rejects the rural contingencies and settles on the central human value of love. But there is a more disturbing possible reading which sees his wife's sudden girlish vitality as threatening to Harry (his hands trembling from anxiety rather than tenderness and his starting a symptom of lostness), so that her last line sounds cloyingly possessive. Carver's endings are often poised on this kind of irresolution: the values (like love, simplicity, permanence) are glimpsed but scarcely grasped

* * *

We can locate Carver in various traditions. There is Chekhov, on whose death the story 'Errand' is based and about whom Carver has written in several places. He admired Chekhov above all as a 'consummate artist', dedicated to the discipline of art, and quoted his admonition to a fellow-writer 'Your laziness stands out between the lines of every story. You don't work on your sentences. You must you know. That's what makes art.'¹⁶ And Carver kept on his desk on a three-by-five card the fragment of a sentence from a story by Chekhov: ' . . . and suddenly everything became clear to him.'

I find these words filled with wonder and possibility. I love their simple clarity, and the hint of revelation that's implied. There is mystery, too. What has been unclear before? Why is it just now becoming clear? What's happened? Most of all – what now? There are consequences as a result of such awakenings. I feel a sharp sense of relief – and anticipation.¹⁷

There is also Joyce, about whom Carver has not to my knowledge spoken, but whose *Dubliners* is in its 'scrupulous meanness' surely a predecessor of Carver's loaded plainness. But most directly perhaps there is an American tradition, the most obvious exemplar of which is Hemingway, but which goes back to Pound and W. C. Williams, and probably beyond to Whitman and Thoreau. Pound's statement was also one of Carver's touchstones: 'Fundamental accuracy of statement is the ONE sole

¹⁶ Quoted by Carver in 'The Unknown Chekhov', *No Heroics Please: Uncollected Writings*, p. 146

¹⁷ *Fires*, op. cit., p. 23

morality of writing.¹⁸ Williams is in direct descent from Pound, and in Williams we find a pared down utterance, the focus on 'things' and a preoccupation with the lives of the poor which is similar to Carver's. This too brings us back to pastoral, a term which provides the title of two of Williams's early poems 'This is the first'

PASTORAL

When I was younger
 it was plain to me
 I must make something of myself
 Older now
 I walk back streets
 admiring the houses
 of the very poor
 roof out of line with sides
 the yards cluttered
 with old chicken wire, ashes,
 furniture gone wrong,
 the fences and the outhouses
 built of barrel-staves
 and parts of boxes, all,
 if I am fortunate,
 smeared a bluish green
 that properly weathered
 pleases me best
 of all colors
 No one
 will believe this
 of vast import to the nation

There is much of Carver in that sympathy for simple material things, the broken down, the asymmetrical, the haphazard, the weathered, and the exact colour of a particular world, expressive as it is of the human effort to make that world habitable. The political dimension of Carver's work (which is so rarely, if ever, overtly political) is not that it proposes any political solutions to its social ills, or even, as has been suggested, that it presents a world that needs to be changed or escaped from (though it could prompt these feelings). It is rather that it widens our sympathies and puts us in touch again with some of the basic elements of human motive and survival. It can do this because it creates an idiom which is

¹⁸ *Fires*, op. cit., p. 23

entirely of our time, a new kind of realism, a new accent. It is that new accent which from the very first lines of a story – those surprising, banal openings – catches at our attention.

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