Abstract

Raymond Carver's "Cathedral" can be read as a story of a metaphorically blind narrator's intimate and transformative interaction with a physically blind man, an interaction in which the narrator evolves from someone who"[doesn't] believe in anything" into someone capable of finding meaning in life. By focusing attention on the parallel de-evolution of his wife's engaged presence, this essay suggests that the couple inhabit a world of the dispossessed in which agency is a zero-sum game, and thus questions, in part through consideration of narrative distance and gender relations, whether the story can promise any lasting change.

Keeping Our Eyes Closed: Unsustainable Transformation in Raymond Carver's "Cathedral"

Madeleine Stein

The arc of Raymond Carver's "Cathedral" appears smooth and complete: a narrator warily and grumpily awaits the arrival of a blind man whom his wife has invited to dinner. He seems bent on getting through most of the evening by sharing a series of sardonic jokes with himself ("It's one of our pastimes," he says to the blind man after offering him a drink (216)), but his plans to remain disengaged are derailed when he is called on to describe a cathedral to the blind man. He takes a minute to absurdly consider if he could describe a cathedral even if his "life was being threatened by an insane guy who said [he] had to do it or else" and finally tells the blind man that it just "isn't in [him] to do it" (226). He doesn't have the words. But the blind man, who by now seems more divine messenger than guest, has an idea: they will draw one instead. And so they do, on an old paper shopping bag, with a ballpoint pen, the blind man's hand resting on the narrator's until, with his own eyes closed, he gets it. Throughout the story the narrator, even more unreliable to himself than to us, reveals his hopes and fears through the choreography of mundane actions and objects--his clueless search for a ball point pen, or an onion skin floating ominously at the bottom of the shopping bag. Determinedly anhedonic at the start, he experiences a moment of intimacy and freedom, maybe even joy, as he and the blind man draw. His last words to us are: "It's really something"; as such the ending not only exemplifies but helps us to define epiphany.

On initial reading, the narrator's wife neatly provides a motivating counterpoint. Ten years earlier, on a different coast, she had worked as a reader for the blind man and stayed in touch with him through tapes. Early on, the husband turns aside from his own narrative to tell us the history of this friendship, and what clearly astounds him (but not us) the most is that on her last day on the job, the blind man touched her, tracing the shape of her face "—even her neck!" (210). Robert C.

Clark suggests that the narrator, by dwelling on this detail of touch, is retrospectively recognizing that his wife "provided the impetus for the drawing scene…by demonstrating how engaging in a sensory exchange with another person can lead to profound understanding" (113).

Thus the wife (and to the end she is known as "my wife") is established as one whose sensibility is exactly that which escapes the husband. Unlike him, she is, in this reading, "actively involved in the process of living," and finding meaning in her life, as Vanessa Hall suggests is typical of Carver's female characters (60). To her ability to be intimate with another is quickly added emotional delicacy (her suicide attempt in the face of an unfeeling military establishment), her inclination to turn towards words for solace and escape (she tried to write a poem about the touch, as was her habit), and her ability to move outward into the world (she is at the outset, out of the house, gone to pick up her friend at the train) or what Kirk Nesset calls "her independent nature in general" (124) —all those exact attributes without which the narrator is trapped inside himself.

All is in place, but, as with most rich literature, the story turns itself over with each reading to reveal more complications, and at a certain point what is revealed begins to undermine this neatness and even the reliability of the concepts of epiphany and transformation in reading this story. Does the narrator, in fact, undergo a change?

That in this story the narrator has experienced something for the first time is made explicit: "It was like nothing else in my life up to now" (228). But, do all epiphanies—all realizations or revelations—by their nature bring about change? It seems likely that one of the oldest scenes of epiphany—that is, the Epiphany, the manifestation of Christ to the Magi—did bring about felt change. Like other religious revelations, what was revealed concerned our relationship to divinity, and, in a worldview that includes divinity, there is a story, an arc, and most importantly, the possibility of existence in a world made *meaning*ful by its relation to another world. But that's not Carver's world. Carver writes from a world narrated by a man who says, "I guess I don't believe in anything" (225), a world in which revelations/epiphanies, as powerless as those who experience them, occur simply as that—brief revelations, or glimpses, that not only do not in themselves last but do not necessarily impinge upon life as lived and perceived by an individual, because the world, as experienced by Carver's narrator, is only a parallel, or even subordinate, world to an unspecified other world in which larger forces bring about change. In his world, even interior changes are tenuous and passing, no more capable of sustaining themselves in the face of external circumstances and pressure than the uplift after the first sip of Scotch.

The nature of this world is made clear, and in some ways set, as if by contract, in the first sentence. The opening word of the story "this" (followed by "blind man,") first induces our awareness of the narrator's (and so our own, for already with this word he has established his occupation of ourselves, and his interest become ours) futility and absurdity. "This" (the more neutral version would be "a") connotes not only his distrust of the world and his need to keep his distance but also his perception that his situation is a given, which, although as yet unspecified by him, has been specified somehow by a force larger than himself. This sense continues throughout the story, through the use of short passive sentences ("Arrangements were made" (209)) that say to the reader: *you know what I mean, it's all been written already,* and his use of parentheses (later in the story, he sums up his responses to the blind man's question in this fashion: "How long had I been in the present position? (Three years.) Did I like my work? (I didn't.) Was I going to stay with it? (What were the options?)" (218))—parentheses that say: *What else could I say; what else could be true? Do I have any choice? And, anyway, you know all this.* How this particular nameless working-class white man, and maybe we, can continue to live with this inevitability, is then the question that carries us through to and beyond the end.

That there is no explicit change recorded does not, of course, preclude the fact of a change. Robert C. Clark, in an exploration of the aesthetic of Carver's minimalism, sees the story's narrator as an example of a minimalist narrator who "objectively reports past sensory experiences" but cannot grasp their significance (104). Specifically, he notes that "time and distance have not granted [the narrator of "Cathedral"] the capacity to explain why he is different" (111). The change, the difference, this would imply, then manifests itself in the intervening time and space between the narrative and the reading. But has time, in fact, passed; has distance been covered? Clark would say yes, as this "oft-anthologized tale is a first-person *retrospective* narration, a crucial fact that most scholars tend to either miss or ignore" (108; emphasis mine). The narrator's position, he articulates, is "one of remembrance; he is thinking back to a previous state of 'self.'" While possible, maybe even probable, this is not the only reading, and there are others that free the narrative more from the present time of the reader, the one into which presumably time has passed.

The fact that the narrative is recounted in the past tense may seem enough to support Clark's claim and, according to Genette's taxonomy, this fact *is* enough to make the narrative a *subsequent narration (220)* yet Genette, in his examination of subsequent narrating, recognizes that "one of the fictions of literary narrating—perhaps the most powerful one, because it passes unnoticed, so to speak—is that the narrating involves an instantaneous action, without a temporal

dimension' (222), creating a paradox in all subsequent narrations both connotes the temporal relationship of the narrating to the story and an atemporal "essence." Genette likens this to a Proustian reminiscence, " a minute freed from the order of Time" (223) And it is this fiction that works on the reader, a self already in the mood, ensconced as she is in a reading of fiction, for the suspension of disbelief, and though this suspension is more commonly associated with a willingness to discard the physical laws of reality, imagine instead that one possible way in which we suspend disbelief when we read fiction is the acceptance of a narrative consciousness that is conscious in two times at once—that is, a voice in the present who tells the story from the exact point at which it—or even each of its moments—ends without taking the *time* to turn it into narrative. In this sense, the husband in the room (the hero) is making an instantaneous escape into the narrating "I," the "I" that, unlike him, speaks without interruption, that gets, in the midst of the other stories that erase him, to simultaneously tell *his* story in all its (possibly scotch-soaked) poetic coherence, an imaginary dialogue between him and someone who cares (not, for him, we learn, God) that will replace the broken off, necessarily not fully heard statement of who he is, a story in short, in which he rises to the level an unassailable protagonist. In other words, the disbelief that we are asked to suspend is that the narrativization cannot occur without the passage of time; instead we accept that it happens as soon as the story comes into being and is thus a disinterested rendering, or at least disinterested in the sense that no future present imposes its distorting interests (wants and needs) on memory, but only the deep-seated, timeless and language-based pressing upon us of the unconscious with its buried wants and needs that maybe come as close as possible to revealing a moment's self.

In this reading, what this immediate recall cannot do is have any consciousness of difference beyond the ending, not because it has not been granted by time and distance, but because the narrator has experienced neither progression in time nor distance since the ending. His narrative does not reveal an incapacity for reflection; in fact, he has a significant and revealing though small moment of reflection as noted below. Thus, as a colleague points out, if we accept this instantaneous narration, "the narrator is no longer necessarily read as 'unseeing' (*not* like us, and somehow damaged or disabled) but rather still in a place of experience (like us)" (Osborne).

If the narrator does not undergo even an implicit change, then what is the role of the wife who has been understood as the impetus for this change? In fact, it is the narrative of the wife that first unsettled my more comfortable reading of the story and led me to re-imagine its structure. What I first noticed in the course of a repeated re-reading is that Carver has allowed in, as if in a musical composition, a contrapuntal undercurrent to the narrative of wife as impetus for change—a

series of exchanges between the narrator and his wife that begin before we even meet the blind man and that eventually undermine this reading of the wife's role.

The first exchange in this series opens with the narrator suggesting to his wife that he take the blind man out to bowl. We don't know for sure if the absurdity and callousness is conscious or not, but in any case, the reader's heart ticks on until the wife puts down the knife with which she's been slicing potatoes and lays it bare: "If you love me, you can do this for me, If you don't love me, okay" (212). The husband's next gambit is to ask if the man's wife is a Negro, at which point the wife *seems* to hurl a potato on the floor ("She picked up a potato. I saw it hit the floor"—again phrased as a record of the inevitable) while saying: "Are you crazy?… Are you drunk?" "I'm just asking," the husband says (213). The narration doesn't crack a smile; but we laugh a bit. And so it begins, a series of questions, suggestions, or actions that exasperate the wife and seem both to be aimed at belittling the idea of her friendship with a blind man or to be ineffectual attempts on the part of the husband to get his wife on his side, to enact the coziness of hosts' chitchat that one has before one settles down to the arduous work of behaving oneself in front of the guests.

No coziness ensues. The story moves forward. The wife goes to the depot, returns with the blind man, whom she introduces as Robert (the only named character in the story), and the three of them move into the living room, as, the narrator says with plaintive hope, "a little group" (215). The wife guides the blind man to the sofa that she tells him they bought two weeks ago, and, as noted above, the narrator tells *us* that he liked the old sofa, and that he started to say something about that old sofa but decided not to. And so it seems that he will stay silent, excluded from the world his wife inhabits, the world of expression, not part of any "little group."

The pattern of exchanges between the husband and wife continues, even with Robert there, as if now the narrator, who truly is drunk, is left with only himself and cannot let go of some desperate cosmic joke. The narrator asks Robert, "Which side of the train did you sit on, by the way?" knowing that when traveling up the Hudson there is a better side, but only because it is the side from which one *sees* the river. "What a question, which side. What's it matter, which side?" the wife says to protect the blind man (215). Before they dig in to a meal, the narrator husband says, "Now let us pray," and the wife looks at him agape (217), knowing as we will later come to know, that he is not religious, but she's fallen for the bait: he offers up a mock grace. And so on: "I got up and turned on the TV. My wife looked at me with irritation. She was heading toward a boil" (218). When the narrator offers the blind man a joint, the wife gives him, he tells us, "a savage look" (220).

But in Robert's presence, the exchanges begin to acquire a different tone, and it is in this sense that they provide counterpoint, one that undermines our, the reader's sense, of the wife's positioning as the healthy, wise, and agentic one. After the wife protests the train question, Robert answers and responds thoughtfully as if there was nothing odd at all about it. Because it turns out he does know which side he sits on, he does know the difference between color and black and white TV, and he probably would go bowling as quickly as he would try smoking a joint. ("Robert, I didn't know you smoked," the wife says. "I do now, my dear. There's a first time for everything," Robert says" (220).)

And so, from this point onward, with each step, it is the wife, not the husband, who is excluded, shunted more and more to the edge of the conversation, until, in fact, drunk and a bit stoned, she falls asleep. The husband, at first a bit alarmed at being alone with the blind man and with us, distracts himself by playing the role of an oaf, telling us that his wife had, in falling asleep, exposed "a juicy thigh," and that he had begun to draw her robe over it. But no sooner does he let out this ironic caricature of objectification than he thinks, "What the hell!"—*the blind man can't see*—and flips the robe open again (221) in wry recognition at the absurdity of his ever gaining an edge in his world.

What is noteworthy is that as she sleeps, the husband begins to awaken from what Hall refers to as Carver' protagonists' "inexplicable lethargy" (60). When the blind man asks him whether he minded if the blind man stayed up longer, the husband says, "I'm glad for the company." (222) And then, as if coming upon himself from behind, he turns to us and adds, "And I guess I was," as if he had come upon himself unawares, and was allowing himself to take note of something previously unknown. He also soon drops into his narration that he usually stayed up alone at night, smoking dope, as long as he could, because he "had these dreams" from which he'd wake, "[his] heart going crazy" (222), and then, after that intimate glimpse, he turns quickly back to the television.

From then on his narration is taken up with his attempt to convey to the blind man what is on the TV, but in the middle, a strangely layered bit of narration occurs. He says to us, "Then something occurred to me, and I said, 'Something has occurred to me. Do you have any idea what a cathedral is?'" (223). The phrasal repetition "something occurred", a mocking authorial intrusion, or possibly a half conscious self-mocking intrusion on the part of the narrator, both amuses us and joins the moment of experience to that of narration, and, more significantly, suggests that in this

passage the narrator considers for the first time what it feels like to be someone else, considers that there are other ways of being.

But still he can't, it turns out, convey experience, even televisual experience, with just words. And so he and the blind man literally escape the new sofa and sit on the carpet in front of the coffee table, like children, to draw. As the narrator draws, the blind man closes his hand over the narrator's (a healing hand, the same hand he once placed on the wife's neck) and the reader watches, breath withheld, as if our hands, too, were on top of theirs. Rather than the narrator suggesting, as Clark has it, that his wife has provided the impetus for the drawing, the narrative's staging suggests that she seems to have to disappear for the drawing to happen.

Consistent with his reading, Clark also connects the wife with the narrator's *present* interest in telling the story. "Carver," he writes, "omits one of his speaker's primary motivations for telling the story: he is indirectly admitting that he has a better understanding of his wife" (113). It is this understanding that he identifies as the "difference" the narrator cannot apprehend. Samira Sasani, focusing not on the story so much as on the narrative (217), goes further; not only does the narrator understand his wife, he is imbued with her sensibilities, in a process that Sasani describes as "the gradual transformation of the male narrator [of "Cathedral"] to the female narrator [that] happens when the narrator sees the blind man in his house" (221). Here she invokes Rebecca Warhol's distinction between a "distancing" male narrator and an "engaging" female narrator, in which distance—and here Warhol too draws on Genette's analysis of narrative discourse, is the distance between narrative and the story. The more intrusive narrator, by reminding us (through his or her presence) of the fictionality of the story, creates more distance. Sasani sums up Warhol's distinction in this way:

> Generally speaking, a distancing narrator, as the name implies, discourages the actual reader from identifying themselves with the narratee, with the characters and in general with the story. The distancing narrator may evoke laughter or annoyance in an actual reader who do [*sic*] not like to identify with the narratee. The task of the engaging narrator, in contrast, is to evoke sympathy of an actual reader who is unknown to the author (218-19).

With this theoretical approach established, Sasani then points out that the early narrator of "Cathedral" aims for "comical effect" (221), one that will allow him to retain a "manly" distance and to highlight the fictionality of the narrative and thus not engage the reader's empathy. Later, Sasani says, "the more the narrator gets familiar with the blind man the more she employs engaging strategies" (221), using the pronoun "she" at this point to refer to the voice of the husband's

narration. Thus, while in Clark's reading the ending signifies that the *husband* reaches a new understanding of his wife, in Sasani's the ending signifies that the *narrator* becomes capable of empathic narration.

When the wife wakes, she finds the husband and the blind man, hand over hand, drawing a picture of a cathedral on an old shopping bag. She is unsettled and says, "What are you doing? Tell me, I want to know" (227). The narrator reports that he doesn't answer and that Robert answers, "We're drawing a cathedral. Me and him are working on it," but turns right back to the husband: "Press hard." Neither of them look at her, though the narrator notes her robe has fallen open, so she repeats, now directly challenging the blind man: "What are you doing?" "It's all right," he says, and then, without explanation, turns again to the husband: "Close your eyes now." He does; he closes our only eyes, and she's gone to us. The narrative continues to unfold, paced like love-making, until Carver has the narrator tell us: "It was like nothing else in my life up to now;" the words themselves sound like nothing else we've read in our lives up till now.

"I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything," the narrator tells us, before closing with what he says to the world: "It's really something." The issue of getting out, literally and metaphorically, is pressing throughout the story. But although the wife's ability to move outward from the home (we know the narrator goes off to a job, but his parenthetical resigned responses to Robert's questions about his work tell us that he does so in an even more numbed state than that with which he leads his life at home) suggests that the husband, counter to stereotypical gender roles, is confined to the domestic space, there really isn't much of a *domestic* space, a space of home—or a safe haven—for either of them.

Their common space is a vulnerable one. In the early paragraphs of the story the narrator tells us about his wife's life before their marriage. "How do I know these things?" he feels compelled to ask us; "She told me," he answers, as if telling one's story is remarkable (210). She told him, for instance, and also told the blind man by means of the tapes she made, that "she loved her [first] husband but she didn't like it where they lived and didn't like the military industrial thing" and "got to feeling lonely and cut off from people she kept losing in that moving–around life" (211). She swallowed all her pills and got in the bath to die but instead, the narrator tells us, got sick. Why does the husband tell us specifically of her response to the military? In this detail that doesn't enter otherwise into the story's plot, what foreshadowing is Carver offering in this tightly resonant story? The story was written in 1981, the events related "ten years ago," and when the narrator tells us that he has "these dreams" from which he awakes, "his heart beating like crazy" (222), the narration

echoes that of a war veteran. Can we think of this as an implicit and imploring reference to Vietnam? Has he too been adrift in the "military industrial thing"? Those questions cannot and don't necessarily need to be answered, but the suggestion is there that the husband has experienced horrors that leave him alienated and unable to return to the land of believers.

His "space" seems more like a moving cocoon, about as large as the "old sofa" and the drink in his hand, and that, the old sofa, has been jerked out from under him, disorienting him. Her space is the basket of pens on her table. It is this orbital cohabitation, the waking/sleeping pendulum, and the shared trauma that adds another possible reading of the ending. In this reading, the wife and the husband remain at once isolated from each other, in a zero-sum exchange of lethargy and wakefulness, joined by their communal traumas in a way that even may constitute a form of tenuous love. Love *is* in their vocabulary: "'If you love me,' she said, 'you can do this for me. If you don't love me, okay'" (212).

As such, the information given us by the narrative suggests a world in which even the power of gender to define us is made irrelevant by the presence of other forces. After all, that "comical effect" that Sasani attributes to the distancing narrator lasts well beyond the arrival of the blind man. Yet, neither character seemed liberated in the way one might anticipate from being loosed from outside definitional forces, particularly gender. In other words, rather than the male narrator becoming a female narrator, the story shows us that, in their particular constellation of socioeconomic (working class) and historical (post-Vietnam disillusionment) factors, neither can claim privilege, and yet Trauma transcends gender and has taken it out of them, whatever arrogance is necessary to truly believe one's wants and needs can be expressed as morally or naturally justified, is gone. What is left is the possibility for a more authentic expression, free of stupefying power and institutionalized illusion, a moment in which one can say, "It was like nothing else in my life up to now," and so reveal a conscious self.

For several years I have adhered to the Aristotelian notion that, in a good story, a protagonist can be identified as the character who undergoes a significant change. So, if the narrator does not have a better understanding of his wife, what is the change? Does he come to realize his own prejudices, a common reading? Too superficial; and in any case, Carver doesn't suggest this is true; in one of the last small paragraphs, the narrator continues to refer to Robert, whose name he knows, as "the blind man." Does Carver want to suggest that the narrator can now get off the floor, sit on that new sofa, and then walk out the door into a meaningful job, a meaningful life?

In an overview of "Cathedral," Diane Henningfeld notes that while the reader of the story has been engaged in meaning-making, in reading the signs in the minimalist narration, the narrator himself has recused himself from creative participation, until the moment of drawing. Then, with his hand guiding the blind man's, (or maybe being guided by the blind man's in the manner of an Ouija board), Henningfeld claims that "for the first time in his life, the narrator is actively participating in meaning-making," and sees "the essence of human life." In this reading, the ending offers both the image of momentary engagement and the promise of a new and sustainable understanding of life.

By *sustainable*, I mean to connote what *sustainable* means in the world of development: a change that not only occurs in the context of a revelatory moment, but which is accompanied by the perceived necessary infrastructural and institutional support. I'm not sure we can promise ourselves the miracle of sustainable change in the reading of "Cathedral." In the system the narrator lives in, a possible fictional representation of our own, *transformative* epiphanies without material change may no longer be available.

As such, the story, which is highly anthologized and widely taught, becomes perhaps less optimistic, and students often, we know, crave optimism, crave the message that affirms the notions of consequentiality that have led some of them to college. It seems privileged to ask students to question this, but illusory not to, and I want to suggest that the text as an artistic creation may have to be enough for us, that is, still worth our while, just as the moment of drawing is enough for the narrator. The story may not have wanted to suggest that art supplies *meaning*, a meaning that illuminates life, but only that art, creation, makes life livable, in moments. We only know that art has given the husband, as long as his eyes remain closed, a moment of peace, a sense of being in a world not dwarfed by any other, not "inside anything," and yet inside himself. But his story ends there; he will not be opening his eyes. The story has a beginning, middle and end not because of the occurrence of change, but because it has illustrated a passing, and not a necessarily enduring, moment of unmitigated presence.

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