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# Raymond Carver's "The Father": some thoughts about identity

Daniel Thomières

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- 1 Ernest Hemingway will certainly be remembered for what he used to call his "iceberg style"<sup>1</sup>: readers who can only see the tip of the iceberg floating above the water have to contribute and (re)construct what remains hidden. In his way, Raymond Carver was a disciple of Hemingway and in his case it would be more accurate to speak of construction rather than reconstruction as it is far from sure that we will ever be able to reclaim what is hidden. For him short stories were, as it were, icebergs too and it is most doubtful that he really understood what was left implicit in them. As a matter of fact, writing meant representing feelings of uneasiness, malaise, emptiness. "The Father"<sup>2</sup> is unquestionably one of his shortest stories with its 467 words. I chose it because it raises first and foremost the question of identity, a most slippery notion to say the least. Rather than referring systematically as is customary to theoretical references, I have decided to compare it with other texts also dealing with identity (retaining as I go along the freedom of resorting to a number of thinkers, psychoanalysts or linguists). In other words, this paper does not purport to be an abstract contribution on identity, but a comparison of icebergs and mountains in order to see if we can determine what is specific about the terrain. To put it still another way, I simply and in all humility hope that one text will shed some light on the others.
- 2 Our starting point will thus be identity. The simplest definition could be that identity refers to the quality of what is identical, in the same way as manhood refers to what it means being a man and fatherhood to what it means being a father. These three examples have at least uneasiness in common: am I a real man? am I a real father? do I have an identity? More precisely, is there a "something" (to quote the indefinite used by Phyllis and Alice in the story) deep down inside myself that will never change? We obviously hope so. Every day we adapt as well as we can to life and its blows and buffets, and we like to believe that there is something that sums us up and to which we can always come back to, even if that "thing" is far from easy to envision.

- 3 To reassure ourselves, we will say "I am myself". However when we start thinking about it, there is something disquieting about this proposition. Whether we concern ourselves with grammar or with outside reality, "I", the first word, is a subject, whereas "myself", the third, an object. Why should they coincide? Let us go one step further: if I now say "My name is Carver", have I reached a higher level of certainty? That was also my father's case, as well as his father's, not to mention our cousins'. What about "I am Raymond Carver"? Apart from our writer, it is very likely that quite a few phone-books would reveal the existence of dozens of Raymond Carvers... Yet it seems that we are constantly shuttled between the two types of propositions<sup>3</sup>: "I am myself" and "I am Raymond Carver". On the one hand, identity is the indefinite, inexpressible feeling that I am unique and different from the rest of mankind. In the old days, people said that they had a soul and that they remained the same person throughout their lives whether they were 10 or 30 years old. On the other hand, it means that I belong to something bigger than myself, i.e. the Carver family (forgetting incidentally my family on my mother's side as in the story...) In the second case, identity is a (family) relation and a relationship, that is a link, a connection. In addition, it is worth noticing that these two conceptions of identity contradict each other: "I am myself" has suddenly become "I am another" (to which/whom I am connected)... In other words identification to something/someone else replaces being identical to oneself. It would seem that Carver's father painfully oscillates between these two positions.
- 4 In any case, the iceberg is dangerous, just like this baby which is just as white as an iceberg! For the father, it is not much different from H.M.S. Titanic... The three little girls are certainly wrong to try to come closer to it. At the end of the story indeed, Phyllis is left bitterly crying and I suspect that these tears are what we will have eventually to account for. We will thus start from this minimalist text—as Carver's stories are often called—to embark upon our reflection on identity. What is the importance of this little baby which does not speak but leaves his father "without expression" in the end after having encouraged all these members of the female sex to heap cliché upon cliché on the theme of "Who do you love, baby?"

## The mother

- 5 Is it possible to describe a baby? Is it possible to describe anyone? What could we say for instance about Raymond Carver? He is seven feet tall, he is 50 years old, he is tall, he is old, he is intelligent, he is handsome, he is an angel, etc. We can thus go from the objective to the subjective and we actually leave the realm of objectivity very quickly: is he celebrating his fiftieth birthday today? is he between 50 and 51? are we simply suggesting that he is middled-aged? As far as being handsome is concerned, that seems to be more a judgment than a description. Sylvia Plath tackled the problem precisely in her poem "Morning Song"<sup>4</sup>. To relate in a radically personal way to her new-born baby, the mother in the poem has decided to do without clichés like "my lamb". She writes: "*Love set you going like a fat gold watch*". She also says that the baby is like a statue in a drafty museum. Apparently one metaphor is not (never?) enough. You have to pile them up until you find the right description. (Do you ever?) Later on, she confesses that "*I'm no more your mother / Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind's hand*". All this is a good summary of Carver's short story. It is quite possible to imagine that the baby in Sylvia Plath's poem is also a metaphor of the

work of art and more specifically of the poem leaving the people around it "without expression" too. The mother/poet disappears, which means that she won't be able to control the future life of the baby/poem. As a matter of fact, Plath's baby babbles just like Carver's and we are told that its meaningless sounds are "pure vowels" rising like "balloons" in the sky (again a series of metaphors...) It actually appears that not only is the future indecidable, but that it is also the case of the past. Where does the baby/poem come from? It was, we are told, conceived by "love" which may be construed as a metaphor for inspiration. What exactly then was the role played by the father? Strangely enough, there doesn't seem to be a father in Plath's poem... This no doubt could be explained for biographical reasons too well known to be dwelt upon in the case of Ted Hughes, but there seems to be a structural reason which runs much deeper. Maybe fathers don't exist...

- 6 At bottom, what is really striking in Plath's poem is the fact that one metaphor is never sufficient by itself. Metaphors follow each other just like identifications follow each other and what the poem makes clear is that there doesn't seem to be much difference between metaphors and identifications. In fact, identity appears to consist in identifications (in the plural). Perhaps we should stop dreaming of a stable self given to us at birth and remaining unmodified throughout our lives. In other words, in the poem the movement never stops and the essence of the baby keeps changing: watch? statue? something else? x, y or z? Arthur Rimbaud was right: "Je est un autre": "I is another", or, more accurately, as his poetry shows, I is a long, unfinished succession of several others. In Carver's story as in Plath's "Morning Song", the baby eludes everybody, just like the final answer to the question of our identity eludes us. The same could also be said of the mother: Plath's knows that she is going to disappear and Carver's who has just given birth to the baby "was still not herself"... In the story, she is the first to lose her identity. Will she recover it one day? In any case, unlike the others, she asks no questions. For her the baby belongs to the realm of what is inexpressible. On the contrary, for the daughters and the grandmother, it is defined by means of metonymies<sup>5</sup> (a part of the body, as the text speaks of lips, nose or eyes...) or of a whole, a metaphor, an identification (the father? someone else? nobody?) In fact, the final identification belongs to an open-ended list as we suggested earlier on. Maybe, though the mother does not speak, she may just as well be caught in that oscillation between metonymies and metaphors: is the baby a whole who one day will be self-sufficient with its/his/her own identity, or is it a part which left her own body?

## The Indian

- 7 Maybe we don't question our certainties until we are confronted to extreme situations: a confinement, war, etc., or when we look at ourselves through the point of view of an outsider. What could an Indian say of Carver's father? For Americans, what better other or double could there be than the Indian? For our purpose, I suggest that we take a look at the way the first Indian Pulitzer prize winner poses similar problems. As far as we are concerned, the lesson we can derive from N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*<sup>6</sup> appears to be that you simply can't define yourself in terms of yourself. To say  $x = x$  is meaningless. One of the Indians in the novel identifies with a horse, another with a bear:  $x = y$  (or  $z$ ). That of course doesn't mean that Ben is a horse or Francisco a bear. Ben is and isn't a horse, and that could constitute the basic definition of a metaphor. As

a matter of fact, Alice talking about the baby (in Carver's story) gives us the vocabulary we need to define metaphor in such a way : Francisco "isn't" a bear, but he "has to be" a bear. The bear, we are told, is a noble animal, who has lived long on the land. In other words it is not a new-comer like those ridiculous pets, cats, guinea pigs, etc., white people are so foolishly fond of. The bear has its place in the universe and is connected to everything that exists. We could say that man-bear has responsibilities towards nature and that nature confers on his existence a role and a meaning. Abel, the protagonist of the novel (the "bear"'s grandson) is a different case. He took part in the Whites' second world war and now suffers from mental problems which explain why he can't identify with anything or anyone. He no longer has any identity and doesn't feel that he belongs to the community. (Admittedly, he already had problems before he left for the war as his father was unknown, not to mention the fact that contact with the whites had modified the values of the tribe). There is very little we can say about him in this respect. The main question for us is clearly: how do you become (a) bear?

- 8 The book teaches us that there are two different ways of being (a) bear: first, you look him in the eyes before you shoot him down with your gun. It's like a mirror which gives you an image of yourself when you don't have one yet. (Hunting the bear is part of a coming of age ritual for Francisco). The bear is thus a metaphor or an identification. The second way is to allow his blood to gush onto you and to eat a piece of his still warm liver. Identity is here achieved by means of metonymies as the blood and the liver represent the bear and confer "bear-power" upon you. It seems true that the Indians possess the real wisdom that eludes white Americans : I is a bear. If you don't look at things in this way, you have to come to the conclusion that man is nothing or just a white puppet leading a mechanical life without asking himself the essential questions... until the day when his children force him precisely to ask himself seemingly stupid questions about himself..

## The soldier

- 9 War is another type of situation when you just can't go on acting in a mechanical manner. It will now help us to probe the link between metonymies and metaphors. I think that it would be difficult to find a clearer answer than that offered by Stephen Crane's Civil War classic *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895)<sup>7</sup>. A young man (whose name is not mentioned until the second half of the book) enlists after hearing of enthusiastic deeds accomplished against the South. He leaves his farm and his old mother. After a long winter of inaction, the regiment crosses a river and all of a sudden they see the enemy charging. We will concentrate on that scene from chapter V. We can start with a list of the main figures of speech contained in the passage. All of a sudden our hero can't see anything and is only able to fire into the fog. He is not even able to think about himself. He becomes not a man, but "a member". He feels that there is something to which he now belongs : "a regiment, an army, a cause, or a country". He couldn't have fled any more than "his little finger" could have left his hand. In fact, the brotherhood he feels towards the other soldiers is even more important than the causes for which he is fighting. Then he says to himself that fighting is a job : he is like "the carpenter" making boxes and whistling before returning home or going to the saloon. Yet he is soon invaded by "a red rage". He feels he is becoming a "pestered animal", "a well-meaning cow" which the dogs chase about. He would like to rush

forward and strangle the enemies with his hands. Then he dreams of "a world-sweeping gesture" that would annihilate everything. In the fog he is choking and fighting for air like "a babe smothered" by deadly blankets.

- 10 The crucial question is here once again that of the identity of this homeless character. Is he a soldier? That is the question he kept asking himself the whole winter, as well as asking his fellow soldiers : what am I supposed to do when the day comes when we start fighting? How do I know I won't be afraid? He was then afraid of being afraid. In chapter V, that problem is solved for the moment (though it will recur in the next chapter). Is he a man? What is a man? He then tries to look at himself by means of metonymies and indeed the definition he provides is quite accurate: a member, a part standing for the whole, like a finger (probably on the trigger of his gun), a brother, etc. What he is doing is basically looking for the detail that will give him the whole, the total image, the identity, the identification that will stop this long enumeration. He then embarks upon another quest, this time no longer from metonymy to metonymy, but from metaphor to metaphor: carpenter, cow, baby (in that order). What is obvious by now is that he has no ego, no "myself" and he is looking for "others" to provide him with an image of himself. He left his farm on account of the lies he had read in the papers. He thought he would be a hero. Then he thought he would be a coward (and indeed the rest of the novel is made up of an oscillation between these two states of mind). He eventually becomes paranoid with his desire to destroy the universe. In his mind, he thus passes from parts to wholes and then to the great whole of annihilation which is the same as a nothing. Just as in the case of Carver's father, after the metonymies and the metaphors, there only remains emptiness. Identity has no foundations. There aren't even links to which he could cling and relate.
- 11 Worse: after all, it is not even sure that he ever resorted to metaphors... If we look at the passage closely, we discover that the carpenter is a metonymy and not a metaphor: when he identifies with him, the protagonist is at long last *part* of his village far from the fog, the heat and the enemy. He now has an identity, a well-ordered life. The cow is also part of the same regression process. As regards the last "metaphor", it allows us to answer the question we asked about Carver's mother. Unconsciously our hero would very much like once again to become a metonymy, a part, without autonomy or identity, but so comfortably sheltered in his mother's womb... To put it another way, behind the metaphor lies hidden the whole mechanics of a long series of metonymies which makes the metaphor possible<sup>8</sup>.

## The father

- 12 In Carver's short story the iceberg emerges and we realize that that there is nothing under the tip. That may be Carver's greatest intuition: the father is empty. Man in fact is empty and identity is an illusion. Actually it is worth noting that right from the beginning, like Crane's soldier, the father is anonymous. We may assume that he maybe does not need a name as he has given his to the family. These things go without saying or asking. He is also probably the one who codifies everything, starting with the baby cot which he certainly repainted blue. (We may safely assume that they're not rich, as is often the case in Carver's stories, and the old pink cot will have to do). He thus seems to control codes and meaning, but the opposition blue-pink is the utmost he seems to be able to impose on reality when he repainted the cot blue. What the short story tells

us is that he will lose his identity metonymy after metonymy. In the end, he has no identity left, or rather we realize that he never had any identity. There are no links, no connections, there is no whole, no lasting identification, and details just refer to nothing. In a way, we are reminded of Lacan's mirror-stage<sup>9</sup>, not because of the baby which in any case is far too young for that and obviously not (yet) concerned by these problems, but because of the father. The father believed he had an image, a unity, an identity, and he identified with it. (It is interesting to note in passing that he is the only one in the story not to look at things, as if he did not need to look at things, being sure of his identity). The text doesn't tell us what sort of identifications he has constructed: airplane pilot, orchestra conductor, seducer... (Indeed, like a great many of Carver's characters, he is probably on the dole and awkward with women...) In the end of the story, he has nothing to cling to. The two conceptions of identity we mentioned at the beginning of this paper thus turn out to be pointless: on the one hand, there is no longer a self; on the other hand, there is no other and no links.

- 13 In this respect, "The Father" is not much different from another of Carver's stories<sup>10</sup> in which a man receives a phone-call by mistake. As his wife is out, he is alone at home and an unknown woman is looking for a doctor for her daughter. The woman invites him to her own place and the man, who is constitutionally timid and repressed, begins at that point to panic. He feels his body and tries to look at himself in the mirror to make sure he still exists. At the end of the story, the phone rings again. The man was expecting a call from his wife but that doesn't prevent him from being surprised and upset. The wife then tells him with—it should be noticed—much apropos "You don't sound like yourself"...
- 14 Maybe what we should do is stop our ears and close our eyes. In the story, the grandmother is the only one not to turn towards the kitchen where the father is. She has her own certainties. She wants to keep her connections, in her case a link with the (dead?) grandfather. She wants to possess him and at the same time to possess herself thanks to the baby's lips. For her, there is no endless list whatsoever. She has her answer and she doesn't want to question anything. This of course is an illusion (but we will let her cherish it...) A baby doesn't look like anything or anyone. That much is well-known. In fact, the text says it with perfect clarity. Let's listen to Carol: "All babies have pretty eyes" (and lips, it goes without saying...) If the baby doesn't look like anybody and if the father believes that the baby looks like him, the consequence is that the father doesn't look like anybody. The baby doesn't offer a mirror to the father who brutally discovers he has no image.
- 15 As a matter of fact, as the text progresses, the father<sup>11</sup> regresses towards nothingness, towards the absence of identity that prevailed before the mirror-stage. In this respect, Lacan speaks of the fantasy (or nightmare) of the fragmented body. That could be a very apt description of the story: the father is methodically dismembered: eyes, lips, nose... In the end, the baby has replaced him, not to say killed him (symbolically). He has even given him his white color and lack of facial expression. In fact, the baby who was an "it" at the beginning of the story has quickly become "he"! Looking at the words that keep recurring in the text, we could almost suggest that the story is a variation on the series *daddy/somebody/anybody/nobody*...
- 16 It could be interesting to ask ourselves why that family has three daughters. Biology? Chance? Is the detail pointless? On the other hand, three is a rather magic figure and lots of things in the wisdom of nations go by three. We might almost see at this

juncture Carver smiling under his iceberg... Should we go back to Freud's paper on *The Merchant of Venice*<sup>12</sup>? Freud talks about the three Parcae (or Fates), for whom he preferred to use the old Greek name of Hours, probably for the same reason that Sylvia Plath called her new-born baby a gold watch... Alice comes first, presiding over births and holding up the mirror with her question: "Who does baby look like?" She is followed by nice little Carol who thinks that baby looks like daddy. At the end comes Phyllis<sup>13</sup> who cuts the thread (the blue ribbon?) and kills father. It is clear that she is taken aback by the unforeseen consequences of her questions when she realizes that her identity too slips away. Who will now respond to her needs for love and recognition? She had not anticipated that she would unwittingly send beyond the mirror<sup>14</sup> the man who was supposed to give her her name and her identity.

- 17 Shouldn't we propose that the baby is the text, as we hypothesized at the beginning of this paper? Reading is a time-bound process in which we discover ourselves or rather in which we discover that we have no selves. The third sister destroys our illusory identity. In this respect, we could say that "The Father" is a sort of allegory of reading, and reading is (mental) suicide, unless we read to fortify our artificial personalities, but we know that that certainly was not Carver's intention. He intuitively knew that only literature can take us back to that precise point before we become the prisoners of lies, illusions, fictions, endless identifications. Carver was always interested in those states of malaise when we stop coinciding with ourselves. In other words, we might say in conclusion that reading is truth, discovery, awareness. But I feel that before leaving them I must reassure my readers : literature is also life. Look at the baby! He has begun blinking his eyes and flicking his tongue back and forth. Identity is not far. Mind the iceberg, though, baby!

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## NOTES

1. He defines his literary "iceberg" as "seven eighths of it under water for every part that shows" (in George Plimpton, *Writers at Work : The "Paris Reviews" Interviews*, New York: Viking, 1963, 325). In this respect, one can also recall for example what he wrote in *A Movable Feast* where he suggests omitting almost anything in a story as long as the writer knew "that the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood" (*A Movable Feast*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964, 75). There is no question that Hemingway's principles applies quite well to Raymond Carver's approach to literary communication.
2. The story is collected in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978, pages 39 and 40.
3. Ever since Aristotle's *Topics*, identity has always been seen as of two types. To simplify and summarize the problem, let us say that Aristotle distinguished between numerical identity (a thing remains identical with itself although it changes through time) and qualitative identity (involving a relation between two different things which nonetheless share a number of similarities, such as belonging to the same set). My presentation is a development of this

opposition and above all an adaptation of it to the problems raised by human beings and psychological realities (which Aristotle obviously did not consider).

4. Published in the posthumous collection *Ariel*, London : Faber and Faber, 1965.
5. To be really honest, we should say that these metonymies are in fact synecdoques. I simply follow Roman Jakobson here with his simplification of the system of figures of speech into metonymies and metaphors. See "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances", in *Fundamentals of Language*, The Hague: Mouton, second part, 1956.
6. N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn*, New York: Harper & Row, 1968.
7. Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*, New York: Norton Critical Edition, Third Edition, 1994. See chapter V (especially 26-27).
8. Both Jacques Lacan and Paul de Man, two thinkers otherwise extremely different, show that metonymy leads to metaphor. Metonymy guides desire from one partial object to another, whereas metaphor provides totalities with which one can (temporarily) identify. See Lacan's "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud", in *Écrits : A Selection*, London : Tavistock, 1977 (146-178), and de Man's text on Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* intitled "Reading" in *Allegories of Reading*, New Haven : Yale University Press, 1979 (especially 57-67).
9. See "The Mirror-Stage as Formative of the Function of the I", in *Écrits : A Selection*, London: Tavistock, 1977 (1-7).
10. "Are you a Doctor?". Strangely enough, this story immediately precedes "The Father" in the collection *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please ?*, as if Carver had suddenly decided to embark on a questioning of the notion of identity.
11. I hope I have now made clear for my readers why this paper has chosen to talk of so many things apparently unconnected with Carver's short story "The Father". To talk of the father, of the self, you have first to talk about the other(s) as the self is an other...
12. The text can be found in Tyson and Strachey's Standard Edition. See "The Theme of the Three Caskets", volume XII (289-302). Freud shows that man has fundamentally three women in his life: the first who gives him life, the second whom he marries and finally his daughter who buries him.
13. I confess that I have nothing to offer about that Greek-sounding name. Was there a connotation hidden somewhere for the author ? Pierre Grimal in his classic *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, Oxford : Basil Blackwell, 1986, only mentions one Phyllis who, it is true, also wreaked quite a lot of havoc on the man she loved...
14. At this point, Carver's smile has almost become a large Cheshire grin as Carol follows Alice, taking us, I suppose, through the looking-glass!

## ABSTRACTS

Cet article, qui part de la très courte nouvelle de Raymond Carver intitulée "The Father", se présente comme une réflexion sur la notion d'identité. L'approche choisie a été de mettre en rapport le récit de Carver avec trois autres textes afin de laisser affleurer par conceptualisation un certain nombre de conclusions théoriques. L'article montre en particulier que l'identité est un concept double, comme l'avait déjà vu Aristote lorsqu'il parlait à son propos d'une dimension numérique et d'une dimension qualitative. Plus spécifiquement, d'un point de vue psychologique,

elle est constituée par un jeu complexe impliquant des métaphores/identifications et des métonymies. Si le romancier américain a pu pouvoir retenir notre attention, c'est avant tout dans la mesure où il montre que l'identité est fondamentalement une construction fragile et que la littérature est peut-être le lieu privilégié où l'on peut en dégager le caractère artificiel.

## AUTHORS

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