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Light and Change: Repressed Escapism in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*

Paul Sweeten

- 1 On July 8, 1980, shortly before *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* was due to be published, Raymond Carver wrote an impassioned letter to his editor, Gordon Lish, imploring him to stop production of the book. Carver describes how he had been up all night reading the seventeen stories, as well as Lish's proposed edits to them. He concludes:

If I don't speak now, and speak from the heart, and halt things now, I foresee a terrible time ahead for me. The demons I have to deal with every day, or night, nearly, might, I'm afraid, simply rise up and take me over (quoted in Campbell, J).
- 2 Lish was recommending dramatic alterations to the original material. He had significantly cut the length of many stories (on two occasions by as much as fifty per cent), added many of his own sentences, altered endings, and changed the names of characters and titles throughout the collection. Carver's concerns were eventually placated, and *What We Talk About* was published according to Lish's design. It was only in 2009, with the release of *Beginners*, that the original drafts became available, and the extent to which Lish shaped Carver's minimalist style was brought to light.
- 3 Carver wrote in *Fires*: "maybe it's nothing more than a working marriage of necessity and convenience that has brought me to writing the kind of stories I do in the way that I do" (30). Indeed, when reading *Beginners* alongside *What We Talk About*, one cannot help imagining that the "marriage of necessity" was that between the author and his editor.
- 4 Since we have had access to both texts, questions of qualitative comparison have arisen. The response from literary publications, for the most part, offered the view that while *Beginners* is interesting, Lish manifestly improved the majority of Carver's stories. Craig Raine of *Areté* said that "Both Carver and Lish are copying Hemingway, but Lish is better at it" (38). Rather than arbitrate on statements of this kind, it is perhaps more interesting to consider the nature of comparison when faced with two drafts of the same work. Do

Lish's edits enable Carver's stories to become "realised" versions of themselves, or is this the wrong question entirely? When considering these matters, it is worth recalling a distinction made by the critic G. Wilson Knight between the terms "criticism" and "interpretation":

'Criticism' to me suggests a certain process of deliberately objectifying the work under consideration; the comparison of it with other similar works in order especially to show in what respects it surpasses, or falls short of, those works...'Interpretation,' on the contrary, tends to merge into the work it analyses; it attempts, as far as possible, to understand its subject in the light of its own nature. (1-2)

- 5 These are, he clarifies, his own "personal uses" (2) of the terms; nonetheless they are helpful in separating two approaches in responding to any work of literature, and are particularly enlightening in cases such as Carver's, where one is dealing in matters of "versions," rather than in definitive examples of this or that work of art.
- 6 It is worth asking whether the original drafts, rather than having a diluted nature, have in fact an entirely distinct character of their own. T.S. Eliot noted that one can be "original with the minimum of alteration" (212-214), and so in considering the nature of revision it is often unhelpful to imagine a linear writing process—a notion of there being a singular *life* of a story or poem from its conception to its final draft. It is better to understand that editorial changes, even minor ones, create new works: original pieces which must be considered in the light of their own nature. On inspection, many of Carver's early drafts can be seen to be doing very different things from their edited counterparts—having different effects, certainly, but perhaps even aiming at something altogether distinct.
- 7 Let us look first at some of the differences in style between the two texts. While Carver's prose in *Beginners* is written, to use his own words, in "common language, the language of normal discourse" (*Fires* 37), it does not possess the heightened—even exaggerated—minimalist quality of *What We Talk About*. When Carver opened "The Calm" with these lines:

It was Saturday morning. The days were short and there was a chill in the air. I was getting a haircut (159)
- 8 Lish removed all but the final sentence. The *What We Talk About* version opens, simply: "I was getting a haircut" (97). In Lish's edit, the day is irrelevant and the weather beside the point. What matters is that we are (presumably) in a barber's shop, and that we are there via the viewpoint of a first-person narrator—an "I"—something which we do not discover in Carver's original draft until the third sentence. The effect of Carver's opening is that of closing in on a scene from a wider lens, whereas Lish's follows the pattern of what may be called the Chekhovian opening, that which places a reader within a scene already underway, providing vital information with little or no wider context. For example, Chekhov's "Dreams" begins:

Two soldiers are escorting to the country seat a vagrant who refuses to give his name. (42)
- 9 The effect of these openings reflects the overall nature of short fiction. They establish, at the earliest point, that the narrative is in some way restricted by the form it inhabits. Stories in this vein are dominated not by their turns of plot, nor by their scope of exploration, but only by their *premise*: the single situational point of conflict to which all other developments relate.

- 10 A story's premise, which should be made distinct from its plot, is often made clear in a single sentence:

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. (89)

- 11 This is a near-perfect summary of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, and presents the basic fact from which poor Gregor is unable to separate himself, despite his varied efforts. In this contained focus, revealed through the myopic porthole of simple, declarative sentences—so often concentrated on the singular, whether on one character or one event or one scene—that short fiction is defined as a monolithic form, carrying the suggestion that the narrative destinations of stories are ultimately fixed from their outset. Lish's decisions about where to begin a story uphold this fatalistic interpretation of short fiction, and provide a framework within which the rest of Carver's text is required to operate.

- 12 One discovers very quickly that Lish's edits infused Carver's natural sentences with an almost ideological brevity, an unrelenting dedication to saying as little as possible. Ernest Hemingway wrote in *A Moveable Feast* that:

You could omit anything if you knew that you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood. (75)

- 13 This, Hemingway's "iceberg principle," became Carver's most distinctive signature following the publication of *What We Talk About*. Throughout his career, however, Carver rejected the label "minimalist" and would underplay his debt to Hemingway. In *Fires* he wrote:

On occasion it's been said that my writing is "like" Hemingway's writing. But I can't say that his writing influenced mine. (28)

- 14 Carver's reluctance to pair himself with Hemingway was understandable given that it was in fact Lish who applied the "iceberg principle" so regimentally to the collection. As we shall discover, whenever a story's overall brevity is applied to its very sentences, the effect provides a narrow cage in which the lives of characters can seem impounded. Lish's edits to Carver's drafts made great use of this device. Indeed, all of his changes, from employing Chekhovian openings to a pronounced incarnation of the "iceberg principle," uphold the notion that within short fiction, characters are thrown along a one way street down which they have no place to turn.

- 15 In "Why Don't You Dance?" a young couple come across a man who is selling his possessions in a yard sale. The couple sit and get drunk with the man who, at the end of the story, dances with the female character in a quiet, yet disturbing scene. When considering the two versions available to us, one can see that Carver's signature one-sentence paragraphs, although present in the *Beginners* draft, are used as a key structural device in the revised copy, appearing far more frequently. Here the "iceberg principle" is at work again. Carver's original long opening section is cut into six paragraphs in the edit. These dissections lend a staccato tone to the telling, drawing attention to the minimal language already in use. Without the white spaces which Lish inserted by spreading out the text, the minimalism of the story is not so apparent. Consider the section from *Beginners*:

Except for that, things looked much the way they had in the bedroom – nightstand and reading lamp on his side of the bed, a night stand and reading lamp on her side. *His side, her side.* He considered this as he sipped the whiskey. (1)

- 16 And then Lish's edit:

Except for that, things looked much the way they had in the bedroom – nightstand and reading lamp on his side of the bed, a night stand and reading lamp on her side.

His side, her side.

He considered this as he sipped the whiskey. (3)

- 17 In the first extract, although the execution is sharp and spare, it does not convey that barren style for which *What We Talk About* was praised. Simply by dispersing the text and removing italics, the effect is, as critics have noted, “monotone” and “deadeningly sparse,” having both verbal “anorexia” and “stunning inarticulateness” (Eichman 86; Bell 67; Houston 23).
- 18 In removing italics, Lish removed emphasis, inviting that monotone reading. These edits reduce Carver’s conventional, more expansive style into something of a list; a presentation of information akin to stage direction that not only lacks any stylistic flourishes or turns of phrase, but obsessively seeks to avoid them. As the young couple in “Why Don’t You Dance?” consider their unusual situation, the inarticulate narrative developed by Lish works together with the brevity of the sentences to create a narrow world within the story. “She could see the evening star (4)” becomes “She thought she could see a star” (7). Similarly Max, the character selling his possessions, becomes simply “The man.” Leaving details vague or unmentioned emphasises the sense of threat the story carries, creating that “purity of emptiness” (77) Jayne Anne Philips attributed to the collection. Here, Lish’s approach removes a level of connection, even empathy, between the reader and the fictional world. The sections describing the “*tender*” expressions of the couple as well as the girl’s “unbearable happiness” (5) while dancing are altogether removed in the final version. Following these adjustments, the story is one which presents a world immune to any notion of sentimentality, one that is harsh and detached for the characters which inhabit it.
- 19 In *Beginners*, tears flow as often as alcohol. After the narrator of “Want to See Something?” tells her sleeping husband that she loves him, she goes on: “I wiped the tears off my cheeks and lay back down” (37). “Tell the Women We’re Going” features a woman who, having been attacked, “leaned forward and began to cry, quietly, holding the back of her hand against her face” (92). The attacker, Jerry, eventually kills the woman in a jealous rage before rejoining his friend, Bill. The men embrace, and here it is Jerry’s turn to cry: “...he began to pat, to stroke the other, while his own tears broke” (94).
- 20 In these examples, which are by no means exhaustive, Lish’s edits remove the acts of crying. *What We Talk About*’s characters become mute in their dealings with grief and horror. In the revised version of “Want to See Something?” (renamed “I Could See the Smallest Things”), the narrator’s feelings are expressed only with the sentence: “I opened my eyes and lay there” (30). It is not only tears but emotion in general that Lish cut from the stories. The revised version of “Tell the Women We’re Going” omits Jerry’s reaction altogether, ending:
- Jerry used the same rock on both girls, first on the girl called Sharon and then on the one that was supposed to be Bill’s. (56)
- 21 Yet it is perhaps a mistake to assume that sentimentality was the prime target of Lish’s paring. In accordance with the “iceberg principle,” it could be more accurate to say that the edits remove the inclusion of any kind of reaction. By omitting reactions to shocking or otherwise moving events, we leave characters not at their first stage of repentance or with the beginnings of hope, but at the very nadir of their suffering.

- 22 From traditional ghost stories and Brothers Grimm folk tales to more recent examples such as John Cheever's "Goodbye, My Brother," the threat of violence has often been used as an atmospheric force driving short fiction. Lish's edit of "Tell the Women We're Going" reflects this tradition, while Carver's original draft, which includes Jerry's remorse, leaves its reader with the catharsis of regret, and in some sense a return to sanity for the central characters.
- 23 A comparison of the title stories highlights Lish's omission of reaction even more starkly. In both versions, "Beginners" and "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," two couples sit around getting drunk while telling each other anecdotes about love. As in "Tell the Women We're Going," Lish's edit imposes a disturbing ending on Carver's more optimistic draft. In "Beginners," Herb leaves the room after he tells his story about a couple who were involved in a car crash. He gets up and has a shower. The narrative viewpoint remains in the room, where Herb's wife Terri breaks down in tears after she becomes upset while talking about the two loves of her life, one of whom is Herb and the other an ex-husband who we then discover committed suicide. As the narrator looks out of the window, the view echoes the sorry situation indoors: "The blue layer of sky had given way now and was turning dark like the rest." "But," he adds, "stars had appeared." He goes on:
- I had to keep still a while longer, keep my eyes out there, outside the house as long as there was something left to see. (198)
- 24 There is a sense here that Nick has not given up on the world, despite the fact that it may have given up on him.
- 25 The contrast in "What We Talk About" is striking. Lish's edits create a story in which Carver's characters, as well as his readers, are completely trapped in the world contained within the room (with only gin and a menacing atmosphere for company). Mel (the renamed Herb) tells a stripped-down version of the car crash story, and before long we are reminded that the gin is still making its way around the room. At the end of Lish's revision, Terri is denied her crying scene, meaning that for her, as well as for the other three players, there is no release of pressure. The only things to which they can turn are alcohol, silence or, as we have seen elsewhere in the collection, violence. We find that Mel and the others are grounded by their miscomprehensions of love, unable to do anything at all. Lish's edit even denies them the simple relief of standing up:
- Terri just sat there. She did not get up to get anything ... I could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark. (129)
- 26 Here, there is no discharge of emotion whatever. Violence looms in the background throughout due to Mel's instability, but the story is left with the characters having exhausted themselves with alcohol.
- 27 When considering the overall effect of Lish's edits, one may see that the cutting of material is in itself an act of circumscription: it silences that which was at one time expressed, imposing limits and drawing boundaries around an existing universe. This supposition hints at Lish's central contribution to Carver's drafts, namely the claustrophobic atmosphere from which *What We Talk About*'s demoralized cast seem unable to escape. By employing a uniform style, constricting the imaginations of characters, forbidding them the catharsis of reaction, and by ending stories on an ominous note rather than a hopeful one, Lish's revisions bind each story to a common pattern, but also lend the collection a sense of cognisance: the impression that each

narrator is somehow aware of his own laconic craftsmanship, and of the futility of attempting to change a world which seems, by its very brevity and monotony, unchangeable. Lish gave the collection high style, and in doing so he crafted succinct and well-polished stories; however this came at the expense, as we shall discover, of a narrative device retained only in the original drafts—one which Carver would go on to employ masterfully in subsequent collections.

28 We have seen how Lish's edits constricted the cast of *What We Talk About* in their abilities to articulate their frustrations, as well as prevented them from imagining a world beyond their respective plights. Carver's original drafts, on the other hand, emphasised a more varied landscape, one of greater intricacies and, with them, an expansive world wherein characters could, if only momentarily, escape from their troubles. We see that, above all, Carver had drafted stories of faint hope, scattering tiny fragments of light among otherwise monotonous lives. One can imagine that these faint rays of optimism were precisely the kind that drove Carver out of his poor existence and, eventually, out from under his alcoholism. With this in mind, let us consider how aspects of *Beginners* support the collection's more redemptive outlook.

29 Notably, Carver's naturalistic model of plain storytelling did not restrict his writing to a uniform style. In stories such as "Pie," "The Calm" and "Mine," Carver employs his signature brand of terseness. There are no surprises here; the style is that which is used throughout *What We Talk About*: short sections, short paragraphs and short sentences. Lish made very few changes to these three stories. Some sentences are cut and others reshaped, but the latter versions are generally no shorter than the originals, with the style of narration retained in each case. Yet, consider the opening paragraph of "The Fling":

It's October, a damp day outside. From my hotel room window I can look out and see much of this gray Midwestern city; just now, lights are coming on here and there in some of the buildings, and smoke from the tall stacks at the edge of the town is rising in a slow thick climb into the darkening sky. (38)

30 This opening section adopts a tone not often seen in Carver's stories. The narrator is playful, indulgent in detail, and at times almost whimsical:

It could be asked that if it is important enough to warrant the telling – my time and energy, your time and energy – then why haven't I told it before? I'd have no answer for that. (38)

31 The revised version, renamed "Sacks," opens:

It's October, a damp day. From my hotel window I can see too much of this Midwestern city. I can see lights coming on in some of the buildings, smoke from the tall stacks rising in a thick climb. I wish I didn't have to look. (31)

32 "Much" is now "too much," two sentences have become four, and the description of the view is severely restrained. Now consider the original opening to "I Could See the Smallest Things," which again seems bespoke to its story—in this case characterised by Nancy's measured, intimate first-person approach:

For a minute I stood there and wished I could get back that time. Then with my next thought I understood clearly that I couldn't do that. No. But it came to me then that my life didn't resemble the life I thought I'd have when I had been young and looking ahead to things. (31)

33 Her voice is entirely distinct from the poetic descriptions of the city in "The Fling"; distinct also from the narrator of "The Calm," who Carver endows with ample terseness:

I liked this barber. We weren't acquainted by name. But when I came in for a haircut, he knew me. He knew I used to fish. (31)

- 34 In the revised versions, Lish's edits pull every story in line to match *this* style. The narrators of *What We Talk About*, whether first or third person, are virtually indistinct from one another in their delivery. A few stylistic signatures remain—the abundance of “he goes/she goes” in “Gazebo” and the uses of both forename and surname for every character in “After the Denim”—but the overall sentence length and inattention to detail are regimentally fixed across the stories. Because of this, the collection appears to speak with one voice, of one place, coiling itself around one particular theme. The stories may be considered together to reveal a world “darkened by havoc and loss [...] with little light at the end of the tunnel, or no light at all [...] rife with fear and frustration and brooding violence (Nesset 31).” By maintaining a particular style of narrative throughout, Lish's edits ensure that even we, as readers, are trapped within the tunnel.
- 35 *Beginners*, conversely, attends to the individuality of each case it explores. Besides variation, as has already been hinted, what marks *Beginners* as distinct from *What We Talk About* is detail. Carver's early drafts used contextual information to give his characters pasts, futures and, consequently, *character*. In “I Could See the Smallest Things,” Nancy tells us:
- Cliff had to get up too, but he'd gone to bed hours ago and would be okay when the alarm went off. Maybe he'd have a headache ... four aspirin and he'd be all right.
(31)
- 36 Here we are projected into Cliff and Nancy's futures, if only for a sentence. Later, when we meet a man called Sam Lawton, Nancy gives us a long history of his life, including an anecdote of when she had seen his albino baby. All of this context, from Cliff's possible headache to the albino's “poor little finger tips” (33), are cut in the revision. Sam's history is a whistle-stop paragraph: “Sam had lost Millie, gotten married again, and became a father again all in the space of no time at all” (28). No time at all indeed.
- 37 While Lish often targeted Carver's redemptive endings and sentimental reflections, the characters of *Beginners* in their original states—rounded, complex, with their lives cast out before and beyond the events in their stories—earn their emotional output in the roundness of character they are given, and in the broader spectrum of time and geography to which their narratives give rise. It is not that Lish removed unwarranted inclusions of sentiment, but that his vision for the collection was grounded in an entirely different emotional register to Carver's: Lish's being one of claustrophobia over escapism, stark reality over imagination, and suppression over catharsis.
- 38 “A Small, Good Thing,” revised as “The Bath,” underwent Lish's heaviest edit in the transition between *Beginners* and *What We Talk About*. “The Bath” begins with a mother ordering a birthday cake for her son, Scotty. Soon after, Scotty is hit by a car and taken to hospital where he falls into a coma. The anxious parents fret over his condition. On a trip home the father receives a threatening telephone call from the baker, who says, “There's a cake that wasn't picked up” (41), without so much as saying where he's calling from. Back at the hospital, Scotty is still unconscious. The father returns and tells his wife, Ann, to get some rest. She does, but not before encountering a couple who are at the hospital for their own son, Nelson, who too is in a critical condition. The mother of the family mistakes Ann for a doctor and begins pleading with her for news. Ann finally gets home, disordered with worry for her son and by the strange encounter with the other family.

The baker calls the house again, and when Ann asks whether the call is about Scotty, the voice replies, “It has to do with Scotty, yes” (47).

- 39 This story, Lish’s edited version, is driven by Scotty’s condition—will he or won’t he regain consciousness?—yet the baker’s looming presence lends “The Bath” its most powerful effect: that of menace. We are left to imagine Ann’s reaction to the baker’s last call—her sense of bewilderment and panic as she believes the news of her son’s deterioration (his death, even) is about to be delivered by the sinister “voice” (47). In this mould, “The Bath” is a story about inarticulateness, misunderstanding and the loss of control.
- 40 Where “The Bath” ends, “A Small, Good Thing” goes on to detail the mother’s reaction. She returns to the hospital in time to witness her son’s death, then, while grieving, the Weisses are again called by the baker. This time the mother recognises the voice, and demands that her husband drive her down to the bakery in the middle of the night. The couple confront the baker, but following a cathartic release of grief and guilt, the three people sit down and eat freshly baked bread.
- 41 Unlike Carver’s typical cast, the characters of “A Small, Good Thing” seem entirely unused to disaster and cynicism. These are good parents, living in a pleasant community, who are undone by this single event. The transition from their middle-class contentment to the tragedy of their son’s death is so markedly drawn that the parents’ inability to deal with the situation becomes the central focus of the story. Before Scotty’s death, Ann Weiss is persistently hysterical in the presence of medical staff, exclaiming, “Oh, no,” or, “My God” (72), whenever doctors are unable to answer her questions. After seeing her son die, she cannot find a way to express her emotions:
- She heard herself and thought how unfair it was that the only words that came out were the sorts of words on the TV shows where people were stunned by violent or sudden deaths. (74)
- 42 In a short space of time she expresses guilt, sorrow, denial and anger. Just how unforeseen this tragedy was in the light of their happy lives is stated again and again. The atmosphere of “The Bath,” however, is not so turbulent. The edits ensure that *What We Talk About*’s established forces of cynicism and menace are so domineering that any attempt by the parents to express hope or sadness are at once recognisably futile. No amount of praying or crying will cure the state of things.
- 43 Following from the characters of “A Small, Good Thing” seemingly having access to a broader range of emotions, the couple in Carver’s original draft also make use of their extended lives by stepping outside of the hospital, outside of their home, and outside of what, at first glance, seems to have been the short story’s premise—that of a boy fighting for his life. Their visiting the baker is an unanticipated turn which refocuses our perception of the story’s first half: what we have read is not a tale of menace or mistaken identity, but one of a couple struggling to pause in their lives long enough to appreciate “small, good” things. The contrast of the baker’s kindness in the final scene is vital to the story’s effect, as is its sense of being unexpected, both for the characters themselves as well as for the reader. The introduction of a segue or alternative perspective, a narrative divergence that seems at first to be almost irrelevant to that which has come before it, was a device Carver eventually used with powerful effect in his next collection, *Cathedral*.
- 44 It is clear that Carver himself was often troubled with feelings of hopelessness. In his essay “Fires,” he recalls a bleak epiphany at a time when he had been working long hours in menial jobs to support his wife and children. After waiting half an hour in a

laundromat for a dryer to become available, he sees that a machine has stopped spinning and plans to “get rid of the clothes and replace them with [his] own” (32). But just as he is about to do this a woman opens the dryer, feels the clothes, “closed the door and put two more dimes in the machine” (32). He goes on:

Up to that point in my life I'd gone along thinking, what exactly, I don't know, but that things would work out somehow—that everything in my life I'd hoped for or wanted to do, was possible. But at that moment, in the laundromat, I realized that this simply was not true. I realized—what had I been thinking before?—that my life was a small-change thing for the most part, chaotic, and without much light showing through. (33)

- 45 This anecdote is told in the vein of *What We Talk About*: a bleak situation made bleaker by a sense of hopelessness. Yet despite his predicaments, Carver remained, at least in his writing, a man of subtle optimism, drafting stories of desperate souls who nevertheless glimpsed distant horizons, ways out, or could take some comfort from simple things. Carver wrote in his essay “On Writing” that:

...extremely clever chichi writing, or just plain tomfoolery writing, puts me to sleep. Writers don't need tricks or gimmicks or even necessarily need to be the smartest fellows on the block. At the risk of appearing foolish, a writer sometimes needs to be able to just stand and gape at this or that thing—a sunset or an old shoe—in absolute and simple amazement. (23)

- 46 As we have seen, by removing *Beginners'* redemptive endings—from the “something left to see” (198) in the title story to the friends' embrace in “Tell the Women We're Going”—Lish removed Carver's “stand and gape” reflections, paring language to a degree that could even be considered “chichi.” The desolate voice of *What We Talk About* takes Hemingway's “iceberg principle” to its formal limits, and could even be understood to qualify for Carver's definition of “formal innovation”, writing that displays:

a licence to try to brutalize or alienate a reader. Too often such writing gives us no news of the world, or else describes a desert landscape and that's all—a few dunes and lizards here and there, but no people; a place uninhabited by anything recognizably human (24)

- 47 By the time *Cathedral* was published in 1983, Carver had insisted that Lish play a supporting, rather than leading, role in suggesting alterations. As such, “A Small, Good Thing” was reinstated in its original form, Carver's landscape was populated by a more expressive and arguably more human cast, and narrative turns—from states of inarticulateness to the suggestions of something understood—were used as key devices throughout the collection.

- 48 Carver's most famous story, “Cathedral,” begins with the narrator struggling to empathise with a blind man who comes to stay with him and his wife. The narrator doesn't know what to say to the blind man. “I started to say something about the sofa. I'd liked that old sofa. But I didn't say anything” (296-297). When the blind man says something about the color television, the remark fails to illicit any reaction whatever: “I didn't know what to say to that,” the narrator confesses. “I had absolutely nothing to say to that. No opinion” (300). From this inarticulate beginning, reminiscent of Lish's design, the story takes an unusual turn of events, and our narrator begins to let down his guard. During the scene in which, together, the men draw a cathedral on the back of an old paper bag, there is a sense that something has been understood, and that the barriers of the narrator's prejudice, his “small change” life, and of his own inarticulateness are

lifted, if only for a moment. This effect is dependent on and owing to the unexpected—even bizarre—nature of the scene:

First I drew a box that looked like a house. It could have been the house I lived in.
Then I put a roof on it. At either end of the roof, I drew spires. Crazy. (306)

49 The exclamation “Crazy” speaks not only of the unusual scene itself, but also of its intervention in the narrative course of the story. There is a sense that we are off-road here, the trajectory of events side-tracked and overshoot by this unexpected turn, just as in the final scenes of “A Small, Good Thing,” “Tell the Women” and others in *Beginners*.

50 The scene in which the blind man guides the narrator’s hand in drawing a cathedral was understood by Craig Raine to be analogous to the relationship between Carver and Lish:

It is a story about writing, a story about the editorial process—in which someone without talent is used by someone else to write. The major contributor is the blind man. He can’t do it without the boobus, but it is clear who does the writing. (44)

51 Raine paints Carver’s writing “Cathedral” as a “brave” (44) admission of the debt owed to Lish’s editorial talents. It is difficult to reconcile this reading, however, given that “Cathedral” is essentially a cathartic story. It is a redemptive account of how a man’s repressed life and cynical outlook is liberated by the brief affinity shared between the central characters. Taking Raine’s allegory along its natural course—supposing that Carver really was writing about his own situation—one is required to advance the notion that Lish’s interference was in some way an exalting experience for the author, and that the editor’s guiding hand infused Carver’s stilted imagination with expressions he had never previously known, rather than, as his letters show, something which caused him much anxiety and frustration. Is it not more accurate to say that “Cathedral,” if at all analogous to the relationship between Carver and Lish, is a story about turning away from restraint and cynicism, a tale in which instinct breaks free from propriety, wherein the drawing of the cathedral presents a celebration of unpolished expression; of first drafts, even. Having broken from his “demons” (quoted in Campbell, J.) by subduing Lish, there is a sense beneath the final line of this transitional story that Carver’s “marriage of necessity” (30) has been shaken loose, and a new beginning intimated.

52 “Cathedral” may be understood to be Carver’s declaration of independence. It is clear that during his early career, the longing to change the trajectory of his increasingly stifled circumstance as a writer (and, of course, as an alcoholic) engendered stories in which characters abandon, often recklessly, the proscribed orbit of their lives.

53 To illustrate the effect further, let us examine a similar “off road” turn found in the writing of Tobias Wolff, Carver’s friend and contemporary. In Wolff’s much-anthologised story, “Bullet in the Brain,” the murder of Anders (a curmudgeonly English professor embroiled in a bank robbery) is so markedly distinct from the story’s segue that the disparity between the sections becomes a pronounced divide, two scenes bookending a life. Running through the final paragraphs is a sense of unreconciled nostalgia; as the bullet begins its trajectory towards Anders’ head, time slows, and he recalls an episode from his childhood.

“Shortstop,” the boy says. “Short’s the best position they is.” Anders turns and looks at him. He wants to hear Coyle’s cousin repeat what he’s just said, but he knows better than to ask. The others will think he’s being a jerk, ragging the kid for his grammar. But that isn’t it, not at all – it’s that Anders is strangely roused, elated, by those final two words, their pure unexpectedness and their music. He takes the field in a trance, repeating them to himself.

The bullet is already in the brain; it won’t be outrun forever, or charmed to a halt.

In the end it will do its work and leave the troubled skull behind, dragging its comet's tail of memory and hope and talent and love into the marble hall of commerce. That can't be helped. But for now Anders can still make time. Time for the shadows to lengthen on the grass, time for the tethered dog to bark at the flying ball, time for the boy in right field to smack his sweat-blackened mitt and softly chant, *They is, they is, they is.* (268)

- 54 Here, Wolff provides a beautiful example of the off-road short story, which, when considering all the differences we have noted between *Beginners* and *What We Talk About*, can be considered one of Carver's central motifs, and the device most often struck from the original drafts by Lish. In *Beginners*, for so many of Carver's players, "the bullet is already in the brain" (268): their predicaments, whether through inescapable grief, alcoholism, tedium or wrongdoing, will remain permanent aspects of their conditions. Yet in the unexpected details of life—details which seem brought to prominence by the constrained artifice of storytelling—these predicaments, though they "won't be outrun forever," may be momentarily outshone. In these moments of reflection Carver allows his cast to "make time," to indulge in escapism and to, above all, "just stand and gape" at the introduction of something which may at first seem peripheral, uninvited, or perhaps even against the strictest principles of concise storytelling.
- 55 While, in Lish's model, the short form bestows its constricted nature upon the situations it describes, Carver's harnesses his cast's minimalist lives to emphasize "small, good things"—such things as a dog's bark, the smell of bread or the majesty of cathedral spires—things which, in such repressive landscapes, are able to exceed the reach of their grasp, and the apparent scope of short fiction itself.

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ABSTRACTS

Ne faudrait-il pas considérer les ébauches d'un écrit comme une œuvre à part entière plutôt que comme une version diluée de l'œuvre finale ? Selon TS Eliot, on peut être « original sans procéder à beaucoup de changements » : lorsqu'on considère la nature de la réécriture, il ne sert souvent à rien d'imaginer un processus d'écriture linéaire selon lequel une histoire ou un poème n'aurait qu'une seule vie, de sa conception à sa version définitive. Il vaut mieux considérer que les changements éditoriaux, même les plus mineurs, engendrent de nouvelles œuvres : des œuvres originales qui doivent être considérées en tant que telles. En comparant de près les premières versions des nouvelles de Carver et les versions proposées par son éditeur, on observe que beaucoup d'entre elles ont non seulement des effets différents sur les lecteurs, mais ont peut-être aussi été écrites dans des buts différents.

(Résumé traduit par Emilie Piarou et Lucie Collas)

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