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On Waiting in Raymond Carver's "A Small, Good Thing"

Harold Schweizer

Sobald ein Mensch zum Leben kommt, sogleich
 ist er alt genug zu sterben.
 Der Ackermann aus Böhmen
 "Childhood has no forebodings..."
 George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*
 "We've been waiting with him until he died."
 Raymond Carver, "A Small, Good Thing"

- 1 The essay examines three temporalities traversed by Scotty's parents as their child lies in a coma drifting towards his death. In the first temporal dimension, time is sought to be harnessed to human desire; here the parents' waiting is purposeful, framed by prediction and expectation whose symbolic space is the waiting room. Once these temporal markers prove illusory, Scotty's parents begin to wait in a dimension beyond measurable time; its locus is the parking lot outside the hospital window where an endless stream of entering and exiting cars performs a temporal fluidity immeasurable and indifferent to waiting and the hope it implies. In a third temporal dimension, symbolized by the space of the cathedral, the futile repetitions of time are miraculously gathered up in an unexpected plenitude, a sudden fulfillment of time, attained in the parents' meal with the baker.

The Waiting Room

- 2 Raymond Carver's story "A Small Good Thing" is full of temporal markers, not only of time and hours but of prepositions and temporal pronouns. As the father drives home from the hospital, his interior monologue of Scotty's accident traverses the past perfect, the past and the future tenses: "Scotty had been hit...and was in the hospital... he was going to be all right" (282) in order to retrace an order of events, and to align them in a narrative that would predict the son's recovery. But once arrived at home,

the baker's call implies the irony of Howard's attempt to harness time to human desire. Time is irreversible and thus irredeemable. When he calls the hospital, "the child's condition remained the same; he was still sleeping and nothing had changed there" (282-83).

- 3 Despite everyone's desperate attempts to alter the course of the boy's mortal destiny, the time in which nothing happens from here on determines the narrative. "They waited all day, but still the boy did not wake up." The hospital room allegorizes the parents' waiting. It is as if for the duration of the boy's deepening coma, their consciousness of time now acquired the shape of a room that the story's protagonists enter and exit. "Go home for a while, and then come back..." says the husband (283). The room literalizes what Henri Bergson would call a clear, precise but impersonal temporal consciousness (129); it is a time without human dimension, a time indifferent to human desire. Thus the doctor's assurance, "It's just a question of a little more time now" (285), rings only with prophetic irony, and the numerous other temporal announcements only indicate the impotence of desire cast into the frame of hours and minutes:

"Doctor will be in again shortly" (284);
 "We'll know some more in a couple of hours..." (285);
 "We'll know more when he wakes up" (285);
 "I was gone exactly an hour and fifteen minutes" (289);
 "Maybe I will go home for a few minutes" (289);
 "I won't be gone long" (289).

- 4 All of these predictions render time measurable; all of them attempt to curtail time, to subject it to human desire. But as the narrative progresses, time simply runs its course: the parents wait, the doctors come and go. "In an hour, another doctor came in. He said his name was Parsons from Radiology. He had a bushy moustache. He was wearing loafers, a Western shirt, and a pair of jeans" (286). The gratuitous listing of the details of the doctor's attire opposes powerlessly the vast, other realm into which the child is drifting.
- 5 Numerous entrances and exits by the parents, doctors, nurses, lab technicians, and orderlies punctuate the boy's slipping into an intimate, immeasurable time. All of them perform in their activities the temporal increments by which the child's otherworldly destination, they hope, could be reeled back into their world:

He moved to the side of the bed and took the boy's pulse. He peeled back one eyelid and then the other. Howard and Ann stood beside the doctor and watched. Then the doctor turned back the covers and listened to the boy's heart and lungs with his stethoscope. He pressed his fingers here and there on the abdomen. When he was finished, he went to the end of the bed and studied the chart. He noted the time, scribbled something on the chart.... (284)

- 6 The laconic brevity of the sentences and the sequential listing of the doctor's examination relieves the parents, for a time, from their worry about the development of the boy's condition. Likewise, the doctor's appearance - "handsome, big-shouldered...with a tanned face" and, again, the gratuitous "three-piece blue suit,... striped tie, and ivory cuff links" are welcome certainties in the midst of deepening dread. By contrast with such temporary markers of reassurance, the doctor's subsequent interpretation of the boy's condition reveals, however, his profounder sense of uncertainty and the disjuncture between their and the boy's temporal realms: "He's all right... he could be better.... I wish he'd wake up. He should wake up pretty

soon" (285). Again, as in the father's drive home from the hospital, the permutations of the temporal modes of the verb to be – he is, he could be, he should be – indicate the doctor's difficulties to locate the child's being.

- 7 His coma meanwhile has removed the boy into a wholly other temporal realm that no one can enter. Only the bath that Ann and Howard hastily take when each of them returns separately to their house might perhaps have intimated a potential for accessing an elusive, otherworldly location similar to the boy's drifting. The earlier title of the story, "The Bath," implies the mysterious significance of the bath; its temporality would have been closer to that of the boy's sleep, placid, leisurely, fluid compared to the parents' strained and restless waiting in the waiting room. But neither Ann nor Howard can linger in the contemplative state the bath would have allowed, despite Howard's desire that Ann "just sit for a while and rest" (289).
- 8 In the baker's calls the permutations of the modes of the verb *to be* have been extended to that indicator of eminent futility: the past subjunctive. Scotty *should have been* eight years old. But the eight candles and the outstanding debt for the cake keep measuring a time that for him no longer passes.

The Parking Lot

- 9 Memory, Gaston Bachelard has claimed, is localized. So is Ann and Howard's waiting in the hospital waiting room. Like memory that is something other than the "strange thing it is," as Bachelard writes (9), the strange thing that waiting is, is also something other, or more than, what is visible in the waiting room. Like memory whose essence is not the "determination of dates" but the "knowledge of intimacy" (9), waiting for a child's recovery or death is not experienced in such phrases as "We'll know some more in a couple of hours..." (285); nor is it measurable as "exactly an hour and fifteen minutes" (289) that Howard claims he was gone before he returned to his son's bed. Just as memory is the knowledge of intimacy, such knowledge of intimacy is experienced when Ann "understood he wanted to be by himself for a while, not have to talk or share his worry for a time" (289).
- 10 "Duration," as Emmanuel Levinas paraphrases Bergson, "is experienced by a descent into self" (55). The "time" that is here allowed for Howard's descent into his self intimates that deeper sense of time recalled in memory or endured when waiting is no longer for something. "The state of unfulfillment lasts unchanged," Hans Jost Frey writes, "but the hope of putting an end to it has been imperceptibly eroded and the waiting has become empty, a mere opening onto infinite lack" (57). This lack, this falling inward and away from the expectations and promises entertained on this side of time – this lack now necessitates a descent into a deeper, more desperate waiting.
- 11 Just as deep memory is involuntary, such deeper waiting comes about through the renunciation of the superficial consciousness of time. "Maybe," says Ann "if I'm not just sitting right here watching him every second he'll wake up and be all right. You know? Maybe he'll wake up if I'm not here" (289), as if withdrawing her vigilance would appease the dying child, or as if in such renunciation of time and consciousness she might intuit his being outside of time, in that realm where nothing needs to be waited for. In their most private moments thus, as when "Ann walked to the window and looked out at the parking lot" (288), Howard and Ann enter the most intimate

dimensions of waiting, a waiting calibrated to their child's drifting, marked by the loss of measurable time and the loss of hope.

- 12 In Carver's blandly quotidian world, such waiting beyond the dimensions of time and beyond what can be hoped for is entertained in the gaze out of the hospital window onto a parking lot. "It was night, and cars were driving into and out of the parking lot with their lights on" (288). The night scene outside the window reveals the detached, indifferent, immeasurable superfluity of existence. In the cars "driving into and out of the parking lot," life is generic, mindlessly in motion – markedly unlike the purposeful comings and goings of doctors, nurses, and orderlies. From Ann's distant perspective, the cars appear anonymous, sliding noiselessly in and out of the parking lot, performing a silent procession of lights, a ritual of endless comings and goings. It is in this encounter with what a phenomenologist would call a plane of emptiness, and which emptiness also implies the despair thinly held back, that Ann "knew in her heart that they were into something now, something hard" (288) – something that would be entirely unresponsive to her and her husband's waiting.
- 13 Gazing out of the hospital window, Ann, desperate as Penelope in her nocturnal unweaving, plots to unravel the fatal coordinates of time: "She saw a big car stop in front of the hospital and someone, a woman in a long coat, get into the car. She wished she were that woman and somebody, anybody, was driving her away from here to somewhere else, a place where she would find Scotty waiting for her...." (288). Ann's inversion of her and her son's roles projects each of them into the other's role. She has momentarily saved him from his aimless drifting in time's vast fluid motions and assigned him a firm destination where he waits for her. She has imaginatively seized the pure duration in which he was drifting, in order to emplot his enduring, to give it meaning and closure, in order to make their waiting come to an end. Though the allusion is faint, she has undertaken a mythic, lethean passage: Driven by "somebody, anybody...somewhere else, a place where she would find Scotty," her wish is for a closure of pre-linguistic, pre-temporal dimensions, to collapse her and her son's times into a time not yet bifurcated into mother and child, life and death, a time where no one would have to wait for the other, where he would "let her gather him into her arms" (288), as if he was profoundly reunited with his mother, as if he was unborn in his mother's womb. The time of such desire is a time before time, it is the suspension of time. But one cannot, as Levinas points out (quoting Heidegger), "*dem Anderen sein Sterben abnehmen*" 'to take on another's dying' (39).
- 14 Ann looks out of the window into a realm devoid of the quotidian dimensions of time. The cars below her window perform the fluid, circular movements of a time in which nothing happens or changes, in which cars will ever enter parking lots of hospitals, a time older and other than the time of the doctors' predictions or the parents' waiting. In the tedium of his work the baker endures the same, endless repetition of time, for to be childless, he tells Ann and Howard, is "To repeat the days with the ovens endlessly full and endlessly empty" (301). For to be childless, he implies, is to live in the indifference and superfluity of time, a time rendered blind and futile by "hundreds, no thousands" of birthdays and cakes, a time without markers or meaning, a plentitude of nothingness. And yet, at the end of Carver's story we find Scotty's parents and the baker huddled together under the "high pale cast of light in the windows" sensing their bond precisely in their common encounter with the empty plains of duration where waiting only opens onto infinite lack.

The Cathedral

- 15 For "hope," as Levinas writes, "is projected nontemporally into the domain of pure nothingness" (67). In Ann's waiting for her child's recovery this hope, despite Carver's light touch, assumes ancient passions. When Ann walks past the black family who was "in the same kind of waiting she was in" (291), the passion of hope is rendered, allusively, in Christian terms. Ann is tempted to ask the older woman whose lips were "moving silently" to share her words. But the allusions to prayer – the passage is predictably deleted in the earlier draft edited by Lish – suggest metaphysical realms that will remain only implicit – but powerfully so – and thus come to bear in the story's last scene where the parents and the baker come together on a plane altogether removed from the world of time: "They talked on into the early morning, the high pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving" (301).
- 16 When Howard, back in the hospital room, gets up and "went over to stand beside her at the window" (288), the redemptive closure in the bakery seems yet inconceivable. But Howard's and Ann's descent into a waiting beyond the certainties of expectation or beyond the fears of premonition has here begun. He and his wife have entered a liminal space beyond which there is nothing imaginable but from which, out of despair, one projects one's hope: "They both stared out at the parking lot. They didn't say anything. But they seemed to feel each other's insides now as though the worry had made them transparent in a perfectly natural way" (288). Then predictably, "The door opened and Dr. Francis came in. He was wearing a different suit..." But the jolt in the movement of the narrative from a deeper to a surface temporality cannot dispel Howard's and Ann's encounter with an intimate, inward sense of a mutuality that has made them wholly transparent to each other.
- 17 The bakery, whose "high pale cast of light in the windows" recalls Carver's story "Cathedral," extends this mutuality. Here the empty planes of duration are suddenly gathered up in an impromptu celebration. Scotty's birthday cake is replaced by a symbolically wholesome bread "heavy" and "rich"; the baker's elated deliberateness lifts out of oblivion one of those "hundreds, no thousands" of unclaimed celebrations in which he had mourned his own losses; his servings of cinnamon rolls, "the icing still running," now arrests the futile repetitions of time where "ovens are endlessly full and endlessly empty." Carver's story ends at the felicitous moment of an unexpected plentitude. Once the baker has served Ann and Howard their rolls and butter, "He waited. He waited until they...began to eat" (301) and the plentitude of their meal intimates a newly attained temporality where waiting is no more endured, where time is no longer. Ann's desperate projection of a time before its divisions into life and death, or mother and child, has here, in Carver's tenderly implicit style, come true – if only for a time.

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ABSTRACTS

The essay examines three temporalities traversed by Scotty's parents as their child lies in a coma drifting towards his death. In the first temporal dimension, time is sought to be harnessed to human desire; here the parents' waiting is purposeful, framed by prediction and expectation whose symbolic space is the waiting room. Once these temporal markers prove illusory, Scotty's parents begin to wait in a dimension beyond measurable time; its locus is the parking lot outside the hospital window where an endless stream of entering and exiting cars performs a temporal fluidity immeasurable and indifferent to waiting and the hope it implies. In a third temporal dimension, symbolized by the space of the cathedral, the futile repetitions of time are miraculously gathered up in an unexpected plenitude, a sudden fulfillment of time, attained in the parents' meal with the baker.

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Chair and Professor of English at Bucknell University, Harold Schweizer is the author of *Suffering and the Remedy of Art* (1997) and of articles on poetry, literary theory, the medical humanities. His recent publications appeared in *Literature and Medicine* and *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Health, Illness and Disease*. He is currently working on a book project entitled *On Waiting*, chapters of which have appeared in *Soundings*, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, and *Journal of Modern Literature*.