Self-enlargement in raymond carvers cathedral

In “ The Compartment,” one of Raymond Carver’s bleakest stories, a man passes through the French countryside in a train, en route to a rendevous with a son he has not seen for many years. “ Now and then,” the narrator says of the man, “ Meyers saw a farmhouse and its outbuildings, everything surrounded by a wall. He thought this might be a good way to live-in an old house surrounded by a wall” (Cathedral 48). Due to a last minute change of heart, however, Meyers chooses to stay insulated in his “ compartment” and, remaining on the train, reneges on his promise to the boy, walling out everything external to his selfish world, paternal obligation included.

Meyers’s tendency toward insularity is not, of course, unique among the characters in Cathedral or among the

characters of earlier volumes. In Will You Be Quiet, Please? there is the paranoid self-cloistering of Slater and

Arnold Breit, and in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love we read of James Packer’s cantankerous, self-absorbed disgruntlement about life’s injustices. In Cathedral appear other, more extreme versions of insularity, from a husband’s self-imposed confinement to a living room in “ Preservation” to another’s pathetic reluctance to leave an attic garret in “ Careful.” More strikingly in Cathedral than before, Carver’s figures seal themselves off from their worlds, walling out the threatening forces in their lives even as they wall themselves in, retreating destructively into the claustrophobic inner enclosures of self. But corresponding to this new extreme of insularity, there are in several stories equally striking instances where–pushing insularity the other way–characters attempt to throw off their

entrapping nets and, in a few instances, appear to succeed. In Cathedral, and in Cathedral only, we witness the rare moments of their comings out, a process of opening up in closed-down lives that comes across

in both the subjects and events of the stories and in the process of their telling, where self-disenfranchisement is

reflected even on the level of discourse, rhetorically or structurally, or both.

As one might expect, “ de-insulation” of this kind necessarily involves the intervention of others: the coming out of

a self-enclosed figure depends upon the influence of another being–a baker or a babysitter or blind man, or even a

fellow drunk on the road to recovery, who, entering unexpectedly into a character’s life, affords new perspective or

awareness and guides him along, if not toward insight then at least away from the destructively confining strictures

of self. As one might expect further, such interventions and influences are mobilized in the stories through the

communal gestures of language–through the exchanging of tales and through communicative transactions, particularly, where separate identities blend and collaborate rather than collide. Thus even as “ Carver’s task,” as Paul Skenazy writes, is to depict the “ tiny, damning confinements of the spirit,” in Cathedral it is also to go beyond depicting the suffocations and wilted spirits of characters in chains (78). Engaging in what he calls a kind of

writerly “ opening up” of his own, Carver draws out in various uplifting moments the momentary gratifications and near-joys characters experience when, however temporarily, the enclosing walls come down–when their self-preoccupations lift and they sense new freedom, a freedom they may or may not ever truly participate in at all

(Interview 21).

But since outright freedom is for many of Carver’s lot as terrifying as total lack of mobility (think of Arnold Breit

in “ Are You a Doctor?” or Lloyd in “ Careful”), the freedoms Carver’s newly-liberated characters experience manifest themselves ironically as forms of enclosure, ample and humane as those enclosures may be. Be they a comforting memory of one’s old bedroom, or the warm, fragrant reality of a bakery, or a vision of the awesome interior of a cathedral, they are enclosures nevertheless. Trying to free themselves of the fetters of insecurity and addiction, Carver’s characters expand both inwardly and outwardly and, thanks to the beneficial incursion of other lives and other stories, imagine larger, more spacious enclosures–places big enough and light enough to allow the spirit room to breathe. In Cathedral, by and large, characters are more insulated than ever, cut off from their worlds and from themselves; but a few of them, like J. P. in “ Where I’m Calling From,” trying patiently and steadfastly “ to

figure out how to get his life back on the track” (135), demonstrate through shared stories and through overtures

toward human connection new and unprecedented awareness. It is an awareness of collective confinement, a sense

that we can and often do help each other set aright our derailed lives, that by opening up to others and to ourselves,

we do indeed occasionally get those lives back on track.

“ Where I’m Calling From” is the story of a man coming to grips with addiction within the security of an alcohol

treatment home. Contrary to the situations of “ The Compartment,” “ Preservation,” and “ Careful”–situations in

which men blockade themselves in ways as offensive to others as they are self-destructive–this narrator’s

confinement is both positive and necessary. Locking himself up voluntarily in “ Frank Martin’s drying out facility”

(127), he is a stronger version of Wes in “ Chef’s House,” a wavering recoveree who lapses back into alcoholism

when his summer retreat–the sanctuary of his fragile recovery–falls out from under him. Up until now, this

narrator (like many of Carver’s narrators, he goes unnamed) has insulated himself with drink, with the buffering

torpor alcohol can provide, his addiction being both a reaction to and the cause of his failing marriage. Arriving at

Frank Martin's dead drunk, exchanging one extreme state of insularity for another, he takes refuge from a prior

refuge–one that was killing him. Sitting on the porch with another recovering drunk, J. P., he takes further refuge in

the story his new friend has to tell.(1)

It is significant that throughout most of the story Carver leaves his characters sitting where they are. Protected yet

still exposed to the chill of the outer world, the porch is that liminal space existing between the internal security of

a cure-in-progress and the lure, if not the danger, of the outer world. On the porch, the narrator and J. P. are at once

sheltered and vulnerable, their physical surroundings an objective correlative to the transitional state of their minds

and wills. Beyond the " green hill" they see from the porch, as Frank Martin tells them, is Jack London's house–the

place where the famous author lived until " alcohol killed him" (137). Beyond that–much farther north–is the

" Yukon," the fictive topos of London's " To Build a Fire," a place where, as the narrator recalls later, a man will

" actually…freeze to death if he can't get a fire going" (146). With his wet clothes, tragically enough, London's figure

is hardly insulated from the chill, even though, ironically, he's bundled up in the manner of the two strongest figures

in Carver's story: J. P.'s wife, Roxy, whose " big knuckles" have broken her husband's nose, wears both a " coat" and

" a heavy sweater" (142); Frank Martin, hard-edged and tough and looking like a " prizefighter," keeps his " sweater

buttoned all the way up" (137).

By the end of the story, sitting alone and enjoying the transitional comforts of the porch, Carver's narrator fails to

recall, or subconsciously omits, the tale's sad conclusion–the fact that, at the mercy of the elements, London's man

eventually freezes to death, his life extinguished along with his fire. Still upset perhaps about Tiny's " seizure," the

narrator chooses not to think of the extreme consequences of ill-prepared exposure to the outer world. Nor does he

remind himself that death entered the heart of the sanctuary only days before, this time without claiming its prize.

Subject also to bodily complaints, J. P. suffers from the " shakes" and the narrator from–an occasional " jerk in his

shoulder"; like Tiny, the fat electrician from Santa Rosa, J. P. and his friend are each in their own way overpowered

by biology, by nature. Their bodies–like their minds–are adjusting and compensating in the process of recovery.

Just as love was once upon a time “ something that was out of J. P.’s hands”–something that set his “ legs

atremble” and filled him “ with sensations that were carrying him every which way” (132)–the aftermath of

drinking is for both men superseded in intensity only by death, the ultimate spasm, which proceeds from both

within and without, insulate themselves however they may.

Before “ going inside,” Frank Martin suggests a bit of recommended reading, namely The Call of the Wild. “ We have

it inside if you want to read something,” he says. “ It’s about this animal that’s half dog and half wolf” (137). Like

London’s “ animal,” we learn, the narrator is similarly divided, torn by inner impulses. At the outset of his first

visit, Frank Martin had taken the narrator aside, saying, “ We can help you. If you want help and want to listen to

what we say” (138). Thinking now in retrospect, the narrator says, “ I didn’t know if they could help me or not.

Part of me wanted help. But there was another part” (138). Partly civilized, partly wild, the narrator is in one sense

interested in protecting himself from himself, his retreat at Frank Martin's a gesture of attempted

self-domestication that, considering present circumstances, unfortunately did not come off the first time. " We're

not out of the woods yet," he says, describing the second aftermath of addiction, the physical extremity of which

leaves him and his friend trembling in their chairs, still caught up in the war of selves. " In-between women,"

Skenazy writes of this story, " in-between homes, in-between drinks, the narrator locates himself in his

disintegration" (83). And yet it is between selves, we should hasten to add, where he begins to come to terms with

disintegration, and begins imagining ways to reintegrate, rebuild.

Above all he wants " to listen," as Frank Martin says, though it is not Frank he listens to chiefly but to J. P. " Keep

talking, J. P.," he says early on (130), interjecting this and like phrases throughout the story in the manner of a

refrain: " You better keep talking," he says (136). The coming out of hardened insularity involves intensive listening,

as necessary for him as telling is for J. P., and for Carlyle in " Fever," who comes out of a psychological and

physical ordeal by spilling his pent-up turmoils to a babysitter. For this narrator, significantly, the process of

coming out involves going into the narrative of another, involves entering imaginatively into a discourse which,

arising of the communal act of storytelling, is at once familiar and unfamiliar. Since “ commiseration instigates

recuperation,” as Arthur Saltzman observes of this story, J. P.’s story initiates through both comradery and

displacement the continuation of the narrator’s own story–and, if all goes well, the reassembly of the fragments of

his life (147). Which is not to say, of course, that there are not perils as well as benefits in transactions of

discourse, the sharing of stories. In “ Will You Please Be Quiet, Please,” a secure, seemingly happy man comes

unglued at hearing the tale of his wife’s infidelity, a story she tells him herself; in “ Sacks,” a son enclosed by his

own world and concerns meets his father briefly in an airport, and upon hearing the story of his father’s adultery

(and his parents’ ruined marriage), he seals himself off completely from his father, more alienated and embittered

than ever by the old man's confession. Before Cathedral, generally, narrative transactions–if transaction has taken

place at all–constitute perilous intercourse indeed.

But in " Where I'm Calling From," as in other stories in Cathedral, Carver would have us believe otherwise. " I'm

listening," the narrator says, waiting for J. P. to go on with his tale. " It's helping me to relax, for one thing. It's

taking me away from my own situation" (134). Still, J. P.'s story helps him do more than merely " relax." Listening,

and the imagination required of close listening, takes him away from his " own situation" even as it brings him closer

to the heart of his problems. His inner crisis is externalized in J. P.'s story, both in the pairing of their present

circumstances and in the details of his friend's narration–in such odd details, in fact, as the " well" J. P. fell into as a

boy. Like the chimneys from which J. P. ends up making his livelihood later in life–narrow, tubular enclosures

associated with the family to whom he becomes attached (they run the chimney-sweeping business)–the well is a

trap, a darkly insulating prison; it represents the extent to which J. P. senses, enclosed until very recently in a

bottle, he has hit “ the bottom” in the present trajectory of his life.(2) For both the narrator and J. P., the well

represents literally the pitfalls of experience, the dark refuges in which they find themselves (voluntarily or

involuntarily) existing, places they are extricated from ultimately only through the intervening efforts of others.

Like J. P. “ hollering” at the bottom of the well, the narrator is waiting for a drop-line of his own, his “ line out”

being (along with his willingness to reform) the telephone. By the end of the story he has tried calling his wife

twice, and is about to call his “ girlfriend,” hoping to make contact with the women in his life. Not by any means

out of the woods yet, though, he is still wavering in his resolve. In one of the story’s last lines, he says, thinking of

his girlfriend, “ Maybe I’ll call her first”–suggesting, given what we know about her drinking habits, that that line

out may send him tumbling back into the hole. Torn between the warmth of stability and the chill of the outer

world, between civilization and wilderness, he is, we assume, still at war with himself.

With two layers of female protection, in a sense, buffering him from the world, he is mildly obsessed with the

women in his life, so it is not surprising that his life and J. P.’s story intersect finally in a woman’s kiss. Far more

hopeful than the peacock in “ Feathers”–one man’s token of a kind of radiant bliss he’ll never know–Roxy’s kiss is

for the narrator a token of “ luck,” emphasizing more than his need for help from without, a rope down the well of

his life. As a gesture, Roxy’s kiss underscores the degree to which women provide security in his life; he has

depended on them, certainly, as much as he has in the past on drink, or as he has recently on the captivating flow

of J. P.’s narrative. Our sense of his greatest personal security comes with his description of the time his landlord,

coming around one morning to paint the house, awakened him and his wife in their bedroom:

I push the curtain away from the window. Outside, this old guy in white coveralls is standing next to his ladder.

The sun is just starting to break over the mountains. The old guy and I look each other over. It’s the landlord, all

right–this old guy in coveralls. But his coveralls are too big for him. He needs a shave, too. And he's wearing this

baseball cap to cover his bald head. Goddamn it, I think, if he isn't a weird old fellow. And a wave of happiness

comes over me that I'm not him–that I'm me and that I'm inside this bedroom with my wife. (145)

Seated on " the front steps" in the chill air beyond the porch, the narrator warms himself with this memory of the

past-triggered, seemingly, by the kiss he gets from Roxy (before she and J. P. " go in," leaving him outside alone).

He associates his " happiness" then, in his memory, with being " inside" the bedroom with his wife, suggesting not

only how much women are integral to his well-being but also how beneficial certain walls and enclosures have been

to him at times. " Outside," in the form of a strange, skinny old man, are reminders of toil and old age, and, as

before, of what lies beyond that illness and decrepitude and death; " inside," on the contrary, there is security and

leisure, embodied by a laughing wife and the enveloping comforts of a warm bed, and by a recognition of his

circumstances as being as secure then as they were.

Thus the contact the narrator makes with an old man one morning is recapitulated by his contact with a younger

man years later, though contact is closer now since both men are “ outside” and are working communally in their

efforts to find ways back in. Epitomized in the gesture of Roxy’s kiss, the intersection of their lives and stories has

initiated a recuperation that may get them, as J. P. says, “ back on the track.” So crucial is this intersection,

ultimately, that it is manifested even on the level of the story’s structure, in the way the story unfolds. With its

disruptions in time and narrative continuity, the story mirrors the psychic energies of the narrator, wavering from

man to man in its focus, intertwining the individual threads of their stories and lives in a manner that makes them

come to seem oddly inseparable, fused in a brotherly textual knit. Promoting such healthy complicity, “ Where I’m

Calling From” embodies and dramatizes our collective tendencies to discover ourselves in the stories of others, and

to complicate other lives with our own as we collaborate toward understanding, toward liberation from the

confinements that kill.

In “ A Small, Good Thing” we find a similar coming together of lives–rather more disparate lives, but with problems

no less serious. It is the story of a couple dealing with the loss of a child, and of the consolation they find

eventually, haphazardly, in the company of a baker; it is a story about the way fear and worry and grief can cause

people to break out of the habitual, insulating, self-preoccupations of their lives, and about how the narratives of

others can cushion the violent unsettling such break-outs bring on. As in “ Where I’m Calling From,” recovery

entails “ listening,” as characters enter briefly into the lives of others through channels of verbal interaction. In this

story, however–perhaps because Ann and Howard Weiss, its central figures, are simultaneously more stable and

more emotionally vulnerable than J. P. and his friend, and because the story evokes a greater sense of affirmation

overall, despite its subject–the liberating aspects of attentive listening are rather more noticeable. With a fullness

and optimism unequalled in any other story, Carver dramatizes here what William Stull calls “ talk that works” (11).

Carver provides here in essence an answer to the failures his characters have been subject to all along, failures of

characters who, in stories in all of his books, talk and listen with characteristically poor results. Corresponding to

this new fullness of possibility, the shape of the story itself swells out to new proportions (revised from its

original form as “ The Bath”), reflecting on the level of narrative the kind of psychological and spiritual expansion

taking place within.

“ So far,” the unnamed narrator says of Howard Weiss, “ he had kept away from any real harm, from those forces he

knew existed and that could cripple or bring down a man if the luck went bad, if things suddenly turned” (62). As

for J. P.’s friend, “ luck” is important to Howard; its capriciousness, he knows, dictates somehow over the details of

his world–has in fact allowed “ forces” to insinuate themselves into the placid interior of his life, forces manifesting

themselves after the initial blow in the ominous calls of the baker. His insular bubble of security now on the point

of bursting, Howard remains sealed in his “ car for a minute” in the driveway, his leg beginning to “ tremble” as he

considers the gravity of his circumstances. Trying to “ deal with the present situation in a rational manner” (62), his

motor control is suddenly as erratic as that of Frank Martin’s clients. Similarly affected, Ann’s teeth begin to

“ chatter” as fear takes her over, and as she realizes that she and her husband are “ into something now, something

hard” (70). Both Howard and his wife–like recovering alcoholics–are afflicted by the physical consequences of

their dealings with an irrational, overpowering problem, in the face of which rationality is useless. Thanks to a bit

of bad luck, their secure and self-enclosed familial world is turned inside out.

As the focal figure of the story, Ann seems both more preoccupied and more sensitive than her husband, not

necessarily because her parental (maternal) attachment to the boy is greater than Howard’s, but because she is

afforded more interior space in the story throughout. Thus, despite the intensity of her preoccupation in their

days-long vigil, she momentarily glimpses the walls around her, walls erected in the tide of catastrophe. “ For the

first time,” the narrator says, describing Ann’s realization after many hours in the hospital, “ she felt they were

together in it, this trouble" (68). Realizing she has shut herself off to everything but her son and his condition, she

acknowledges that she " hadn't let Howard into it, though he was there and needed all along. She felt glad to be his

wife." If in a sense the disruptive force of calamity clarifies, it also causes both Ann and her husband, hemmed in

now by fear and dread, to project outward as they seek respite from confinement. Worry insulating them as

security had before, they stand staring " out at the parking lot." They don't " say anything. But they seem…to feel

each other's insides now, as though the worry had made them transparent in a perfectly natural way" (71). Their

interior state of affairs is " natural," of course, because it is nature–and their powerlessness in the face of it–that

makes them transparent, that prompts them, fire-distilled now by mutual concern, to gaze out the window the way

J. P. and his friend stare from the porch. After Scotty's death, however, they will have to " get used to…being alone"

(82); soon they will have to readjust tensions in the marital bond that have been for years filtered by their son's

presence. What was once a common refuge is suddenly no longer available to them.

As in “ Where I’m Calling From,” the act of exchanging stories is also a kind of refuge, though here it becomes an

even more compensatory one. Ann and Howard end up in a bakery, giving up the oppressive environment of the

hospital–and a house full of painful momentoes–for a warmer, more spacious setting. The narrative transaction

occurring in the bakery is for husband and wife the “ restorative measure” the doctor mistakenly diagnoses in

discussing Scotty’s “ very deep sleep”; at the hands of the baker the Weisses are doctored as their son could not be.

Contrary to the situation of J. P. and his friend, recovery is administered to them by a speaker who cannot

empathize with his listeners, a man as ironically unlike them as anybody could be. “ I don’t have any children

myself,” the baker tells Ann and Howard, “ so I can only imagine what you must be feeling” (87). Still, sparked by

his power to “ imagine” their grief, he begins his tale of “ loneliness, and of… what it was like to be childless all these

years," offering them if nothing else at least the consolation of knowing that they know what they are going to

miss. Thus husband and wife listen, and listening, enter the baker's world–his story–to temporarily escape their

own. " They listened carefully," the narrator says, drawing through repetition special attention to the act, " they

listened to what the baker had to say" (88).

Elsewhere in Cathedral, remarkably, hearing and listening are treated in less optimistic terms: in " Careful," a man's

metaphorical deafness to the world is figured in the literal blockage of his ear with wax; in " Vitamins," a similar if

more general kind of deafness finds its emblem in a dismembered, dried-out human ear. But in other stories–in

" Fever" and " Where I'm Calling From," for instance–characters indeed turn their ears to others, and come away

better for it. " I got ears," the blind man says in " Cathedral," affirming, in spite of his handicap, that " Learning never

ends" (222). In " Intimacy," one of Carver's last stories, a fiction-writing narrator calls himself " all ears," exploring

both the idea of the writer as plunderer of experience (as earlier, in " Put Yourself in My Shoes") and of the writer

as listener, as someone who, by listening carefully, reconstructs memory and experience in order to reorder the

disorder of his past. In “ A Small, Good Thing,” more strikingly than ever, telling and listening are beneficial,

recuperative activities. And yet what is crucial is not so much the substance of the stories as it is the process of the

telling. “ I was interested,” J. P.’s friend says of J. P.’s tale. “ But I would have listened if he’d been going on about

how one day he’d decided to start pitching horseshoes” (132). Enveloped similarly in the baker’s tale, Ann and

Howard listen, escaping the still unthinkable reality of their present circumstances by entering the far more stifling,

insulated life of their host, and thus they begin a slow journey out of the darkness of grief. Though it is still dark

outside, it is “ like daylight” inside the bakery; warmed by the light and the ovens and the sweet rolls they eat, and

revived by shared compassion, Ann and Howard do “ not think of leaving.”

The welcome light of possibility, finally, along with hopes if not promises of self-regeneration, is reflected in the

shape of the story overall, which we have here in its revised form; “ A Small, Good Thing” is two-thirds again as

long as the original published version, “ The Bath,” and is the longest story Carver ever collected. Like many stories

in Cathedral, which Carver describes as “ fuller and more interesting somehow” as well as “ more generous,” the

revised version of this story reflects part of an “ opening up in this book” which, as Carver says, is absent in “ any

other of the books” (Interview 22). From the shadowy, overdetermined world of “ The Bath,” where the tiny

enclosure of a bathtub provides a sole comfort for characters (“ Fear made him want to take a bath,” the original

narrator says of Howard), we traverse to the indoor daylight of the bakery, where food and talk and commiseration

actually do make a difference, if not redeeming characters of their miseries then consoling them at least, allowing

them to understand that loneliness and hardship and death are part of the natural order of things, and that as people

they are not in it alone. Embodied in this “ fuller” version of the story, Carver’s “ opening up” suggests further the

very real extent to which style can wall an artist in–suggests how as an artist Carver, like a few of his more

fortunate characters, is capable of breaking free of enclosing environments, exchanging them not only for greater

capaciousness but, we must assume, for a new understanding of himself and his craft as well.

In the title story, “ Cathedral,” the coming out of a self-insulated figure is more dramatic than ever before, not

simply because he is more fully shut off than some but because, like Meyers riding away from his son on a train to

nowhere, he is ignorant of the serious nature of his insularity. Walled in by his own insecurities and prejudices, this

narrator is sadly out of touch with his world and with himself, buffered by drink and pot and by the sad reality, as

his wife puts it, that he has no “ friends.” As are the figures in “ A Small, Good Thing” and “ Where I’m Calling

From,” however, he too is given an opportunity to emerge from the strictures of self-enclosure, though here it is

not a story that opens him up but a more subtle nonverbal transaction–an odd, unspoken communication between

him and his blind guest, Robert. And as is often the case in the conversations of Carver’s characters, talk fails him,

and yet his failure is more than made up for by the connection he finally succeeds in making, by the self-liberating

results of his attempt.

Not surprisingly, this narrator lives in a narrow, sheltered world. Like Howard and Ann, he is threatened abruptly

from without; the appearance of his wife’s friend constitutes–at the outset, at least–an invasion of his enclosed

existence. “ h blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to,” he admits (209), and later adds, “ Now

this same blind man was coming to sleep in my house” (212). His territorial impulses, spurred on certainly by

insecurity, make for what Skenazy calls an “ evening of polite antagonism between the two men” (82). The

narrator’s buried hostility, we suppose, is rooted in the blind man’s association with aspects of his wife’s past and

of her independent nature in general–aspects that are intimidating to him, not the least of which is her former

marriage, a subject with which he is obsessed. Simultaneously fascinated by and reluctant to hear the blind man’s

story (“ my wife filled me in with more details than I cared to know,” he says; “ I made a drink and sat at the kitchen

table to listen” 213) he searches for himself indirectly in his wife’s relationship with Robert. Like J. P.’s friend,

this man’s sense of a secure identity depends upon his bond with a female, a bond he seems to need to see

perpetually reinforced–though, perturbed by his insensitivity, his wife isn’t about to give him the reinforcement he

craves. Referring to his wife’s conversation with Robert in the living room, he says, “ I waited in vain to hear my

name on my wife’s sweet lips” (218). His muddled search for self, we guess, involves a continual gauging and

protecting of the autocratic status of his name. A year earlier, listening to Robert’s half of a taped conversation, he’d

been startled to hear his “ own name in the mouth of a stranger, this blind man” he did not know (212). Insistent

upon asserting his identity over his wife, therefore, he blankets her past the way he has lately blanketed his

present–with insulating self-absorbency. Summing up her prior life, he refers to his wife’s ex-husband only as her

“ officer,” adding, Why should he have a name?” (211). He is no ideal listener, having predicated the names and

stories of others under the subject of his own tyrannical yet precarious identity: he listens for purposes of

self-validation, relegating the rest of experience–like Robert's marriage–to a place " beyond his understanding"

(213).

It is fitting that Robert, the invader in the house, is insulated only physically, left in the dark only by his handicap.

Extremely outgoing–not to mention friendly–he has done " a little of everything," from running a sales

distributorship to traveling in Mexico to broadcasting " ham radio." His activities, unlike those of his host, bring him

out into the world, his booming voice having extended as far as Alaska and Tahiti before making its way into the

narrator's home. Unlike the baker and J. P.–relatively restrained men–Robert is characterized by the strength of his

personality, and he serves accordingly as the extra-durable guide needed to pull his host out of his shell (though like

the Weisses, Robert, too, is dealing with grief, having just lost his wife; " I know about skeletons," he says 223,

responding to the narrator's query regarding the TV). As the narrator fails to describe the image he sees on

television, Robert listens, and having “ listened” to failure, takes charge of the situation. “ Hey, listen to me,” he

says, activated suddenly by his host’s admission of verbal impotence. “ Will you do me a favor? I got an idea. Why

don’t you find us some heavy paper. And a pen. We’ll do something. We’ll draw one together. Get us a pen and

some heavy paper. Go on, bub, get the stuff” (226). Robert’s initiative in the matter of the narrator’s failings, not to

mention the remedy he employs in general, suggests that verbal handicaps–and the larger problems they are

symptoms of–are debilitating as blindness (stemming as they do from the willed blindness of ignorance, oversight).

Robert’s handling of the situation, finally, suggests that handicaps are first and foremost challenges to overcome.

“ Most of the communication in this story,” writes Michael Vander Weel, in reference to the joint project of the

drawing, “ comes through shared non-verbal work, as expression that stops short of the effort and commonality of

speech” (120). Indeed, as Irving Howe observes, the drawing of the cathedral is a “ gesture of fraternity” that, like

the meal preceding it, establishes solid contact between the men and in turn nudges the narrator temporarily out of

his self-contained world (43). The subject of their mutual efforts–the cathedral–as a symbol represents a kind of

common humanity and benevolence, and of human patience and fortitude, in the process of “ a-spiring.”(3)

Curiously enough, it is within the walls of the cathedral that the narrator ultimately ends up. “ I was in my house,”

he says at the end of the story, his eyes still tightly closed–bringing to mind the “ box” he drew when he and Robert

began, something that “ could have been the house he lived in” (227). What begins as an enclosing spatial

configuration of his home–and present level of awareness, we assume–gradually swells in proportion to become

something far more spacious than what he started with, something with interior depths as enlightening to him as

bakeries and bedrooms are comforting to others.

“ I didn’t feel like I was inside anything,” he says (228), unwilling still to open his eyes. While Meyers “ closes his

eyes,” alternately, to whatever encroaches on his personal life–his voluntary blindness as bad as Lloyd’s deafness

in its turn–the narrator of “ Cathedral” finds not escape but sanctuary within self-confinement, his sanctuary

existing, by virtue of hip, closed eyes, within that inner vestibule of self, where selfishness gives way at last to

self-awareness. A man obsessed with the faculty of vision (“ Imagine,” he says earlier of Robert’s wife, “ a woman

who could never see herself as she was seen in the eyes of her loved one” 213), he clings to a miraculous glimpse

of a world beyond the borders of his insular life, blinding himself voluntarily to the distracting reality of his former

world. The profundity of his new awareness staggers him; “ It was like nothing else in my life up to now,” he says,

and adds, in the story’s final sentence, “ It’s really something.” The indefiniteness of his language–he is usually a

little more glib than he is here–expresses the sheer incomprehensibility of his revelation, and the fact that he

registers it as such. He experiences “ depths of feeling,” as Saltzman calls them, that only a few enlightened

characters in Cathedral experience, feelings that he “ need not name to justify” (154). The changes working in him

are not unlike those “ impossible changes” Ralph Wyman undergoes in “ Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?,” where

even more pronounced tensions of jealousy, possessiveness, and self-preoccupation are vented finally in human

contact. Just as Ann Weiss wants “ her words to be her own” after the death of her child, seeking out a personal

vocabulary of grief, this narrator reaches for words weighty enough to fit his experience, and, failing gloriously in

that, settles for indefinites. Impossibly changed, reduced to semi-inarticulateness, he keeps his eyes fastened shut,

wavering between self-awareness and habitual existence in a new and newly-spacious enclosure; he is “ no longer

inside himself,” as Skenazy writes, “ if not quite outside, no longer alone, if not quite intimate” (83).

Naturally, this coming out is mirrored by rhetoric of the story. Early on in the story, the narrator feels momentarily

“ sorry for the blind man,” his insulated hardness beginning to soften. As the walls of his resentment noticeably

crack, he watches with “ admiration” as Robert eats, recognizing Robert’s handicap to be no impairment to his

performance at the dinner table. The tonal shift in the final sequence of the story–marked by a kind of mild

ethereality flooding the last lines–illustrates on the rhetorical level the opening up the narrator has undergone, and,

certainly, is yet to undergo. Like Robert, who is on a journey by train, dropping in on friends and relatives, trying

to get over the loss of his wife, the narrator is also on a journey, one signalled by signposts in his language and

played out by the events of the story he tells. His destination–as are the destinations for all of Carver's travellers,

whether they leave home or not–is necessarily a confining one. But it is also a destination where one's sense of

shared confinement makes for heretofore-unknown freedoms. " What's a cathedral without people?" Robert asks,

bidding his host to add a touch of humanity to the drawing, to " put some people in there" (227). Approaching his

destination, the narrator begins to realize just how exhilarating confinement can be, once one sees beyond the

narrow enclosure of self that larger, more expansive enclosure of society. He begins to sense, as did perhaps the

builders who toiled for years to raise the cathedrals they would never see–people who were, as Robert says, “ no

different than the rest of us” (224)–he begins to sense, the warmth of the blind man’s touch still vibrating in his

hand, that we are all in this together, and that that really is something.

Carver wrote “ Cathedral” on a train, writing in his cabin during a transcontinental journey from Seattle to New

York.(4) Enclosed in tight quarters, rubbing shoulders with all kinds of people, heading somewhere in a hurry: the

writing environment seems an appropriate one, considering the story–and the volume of stories-which was to

come of that ride. “ It was a different kind of story for me, no question,” he explains in his preface to Where I’m

Calling From. “ Somehow I had found another direction I wanted to move toward. And I moved. And quickly” (i).

Reflecting the process of his “ opening up,” Carver is in this collection definitely going somewhere in a hurry; in

Cathedral, as in no other volume of his stories, characters connect with one another, however briefly, and as a result

of their connections come away changed. Such momentary connections, of course, do not reflect the tone of the

book as a whole. Most of the stories–“ The Compartment” or “ The Train,” say, ironically stories about people on

trains–are slightly fuller explorations, or re-explorations, of Carver’s old familiar territory, reimmersions into

tableaux where human proximity not only provides no real connection but also alienates, with disconnectedness

and alienation coming hand-in-hand as end-products of insularity, terminal self-enclosure. In these stories, as well

as in the lighter ones, Carver suggests that life hemmed in rigidly by walls is a hard life indeed–suggests, contrary

to Meyers’s observation, that this is perhaps not “ a good way to live,” this having a ticket to ride and no idea

where one is going, no connection with one’s fellow travellers.

As Irving Howe notes, the stories of this volume “ draw upon the American voice of loneliness and stoicism, the

native soul locked in this continent’s space” (42). While in rare moments we find characters transcending the

fettered states of soul by means of smaller, personal unfetterings of self, such moments do not deny the “ locked”

status of the characters in general, or the darker implications of Carver’s vision overall. Still, Carver implies, it is

through our collaboration with others that we free ourselves from the slavery of self-absorption. We see in these

stories that compassion, as well as stoicism, is a prerequisite not just of happiness but of survival, and that while

confinement may be the precondition of many lives there is still a good deal of freedom available within it–freedom

which becomes tangible only when it is recognized for what it is. In this sense the stories of Cathedral are on a par

with those that Carver and Jenks praise as editors of American Short Story Masterpieces, stories which have, as

they say, “ the ambition of enlarging our view of ourselves and the world” (xiii)–enlarging us as readers, that is, both

in the sense of expanding and setting us free.

NOTES

1 For a brilliant narratological and stylistic analysis of this story see Verley.

2 See also Carver’s later story “ Elephant” (Where I’m Calling From), in which a reformed alcoholic refers to his

drinking days, and his vision of an alcoholic relapse, as “ rock bottom.”

3 For this coinage I am indebted to Lonnquist.

4 This bit of information I gleaned in a conversation with Tess Gallagher, who refutes Carver's assertion in his

preface to Where I'm Calling From that " after a good night's sleep, he went to his desk and wrote the story

' Cathedral.'"

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