

'WHERE I'M CALLING FROM':  
RAYMOND CARVER, RICHARD FORD AND THE NEW  
AMERICAN REALISM

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I declare that the work of which this thesis is a record was undertaken entirely by myself and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

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## **Abstract**

Perhaps the greatest irony of postmodern American fiction has been the ascendancy within its broad aegis of the very mode that the early postmoderns of the 1960s so dismissively repudiated, namely realism. This thesis aims to provide both a theoretical reading of this ascendancy in relation to the earlier metafictional irrealism and also readings of selected key texts of the 'new realism' on their own postmodern terms.

The initial contextualization of the new American realism is therefore defined very much in relation to the more or less militant epistemic 'ultimism' ('ultimate' in the sense suggested by John Barth in his seminal 'Literature of Exhaustion') which both precedes and to some extent overlaps its own reflexive radicalism. Theoretical interest is focused to begin with, therefore, on such texts as 'The Literature of Exhaustion', Barth's early fiction, Jerome Klinkowitz's critical engagements with both metafiction and, as he terms it, 'experimental realism', and the 'European' new realism of Walter Abish and Peter Handke.

But in attempting to find a critical vocabulary with which to analyze this new realism there arises the need for a more than simply comparative contextualization. The thesis therefore narrows in scope in order to address more comprehensively the nature and origins of its evidently postmodern 'mimesis'. The fictions of Raymond Carver and Richard Ford are selected as broadly representative for the purposes of this exploration, not simply because they have been two of the most influential of the 'new realists' but also because they offer the clearest methodological route to a reading of the problematic but fundamentally important relationship between this postmodern vernacular radicalism and the Modernist vernacular revolution pioneered by Stein,

Anderson, Faulkner and, most significantly of all as regards this particular postmodern turn, Hemingway.

The study of both Carver's and Ford's fiction begins with Hemingway, then, but again a broadly comparative contextualization gives way in the thesis to a closer, 'integral' methodological analysis of each writer's work. In these analyses the inherent postmodern reflexivity of the two writers' 'realistic' modes is approached not from the 'Derridean' position of an *ultimist* 'in excess' metafiction, but from the 'Wittgensteinian' position of a *transitive*, 'horizontally' 'in excess' inessentialism. This 'Wittgensteinian' orientation is applied in Carver's case to the *epistemological* problematics explored in and by his fictions and in Ford's case to the *ontological* problematics of textualized being which characterize even his earliest novels.

Finally the study analyzes Carver's *Elephant* and Ford's *The Sportswriter* together, seeing in both an authentically postmodern and yet, paradoxically almost, adequate 'releasing' of the rhetoric of the 'real' into a kinetic and exploratory, interfacial textuality of telling and being, even telling *as* being, arguably making the irony of Barth's charge of epistemic and hence aesthetic 'exhaustion' complete.

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CHAPTER ONE  
'THIS BORROWED ROOM': ULTIMACY, CONTINGENCY  
AND THE RE-SITING OF REALISM

## 1

By far the most significant dynamic in postmodern American fiction has been the search not simply for new forms, but for a new mimesis.<sup>1</sup> As Allan Lloyd Smith puts it in his essay 'Brain Damage: The Word and the World in Postmodernist Fiction':

The arsenal of...postmodernist literary techniques is trained upon the creation of significant points through epistemic dislocations, in excess of the real, where new recognitions can be made: 'The mind orders reality', says Sukenick, 'not by imposing ideas on it but by discovering significant relations within it'.<sup>2</sup>

'The arsenal of...postmodernist literary techniques' is, in other words, for all its characteristically 'in excess'<sup>3</sup> irrationalism, trained upon a more or less classically mimetic aesthetic goal: the discovery of 'significant relations' in reality. Again in Ronald Sukenick's words, a fiction should be 'not an ideological formulation of belief but a statement of a favourable rapport with reality'.<sup>4</sup> And as John Barth has claimed: 'More and more, as I get older, I nod my head yes to Aristotle. I want my fictions to be not only passionately formal...but passionately about things in life as well'.<sup>5</sup>

This embracing of a mimetic principle by American postmodernism may well seem incongruous, since the antipathy towards literary realism is obvious not only in Barth's influential essay 'The Literature of Exhaustion', where he finds it so 'dismaying to see so many of our writers following Dostoevsky or Tolstoy or Flaubert or Balzac'<sup>6</sup> but also in possibly the best compendium of postmodern aesthetic (rather than theoretical) thought, David Bellamy's *The New Fiction* in which the metafictionists interviewed seem to share an almost doctrinaire distrust of realism, often reasoning along similar lines to those found in Barth's essay.<sup>7</sup>

Arguably, this much vaunted antipathy is not properly directed at a literary style at all however, the tension rather being the result of an essentially epistemological, and mistaken, presumption, namely the automatic association of any use of literary realism's modes and tropes with a naive, semiologically evasive representationalism.

Certainly, a seemingly deliberate confusion between the epistemic and stylistic is inherent in many of Barth's arguments in 'The Literature of Exhaustion'. His primary distinction between a Baroque, exhausted literature and the 'new' fiction associated with Borges for instance is developed from the assertion that the modernity of Beckett and Borges lies in that:

[I]n an age of ultimacies and 'final solutions' - at least *felt* ultimacies, in everything from weaponry to theology, the celebrated dehumanization of society, and the history of the novel - their work in separate ways reflects and deals with ultimacy, both technically and thematically.(p.73)

The obvious reductionism of this epistemic ultimacy and the banality of its pseudo-apocalyptic presumptions is only unconvincingly countered in Barth's essay by his holding up Borges (and any author who responds to the 'felt ultimacy' equally authentically) as a mythic hero, either a Menelaus clinging to Proteus in a heroic attempt to exhaust the guises of reality or a Theseus in the labyrinth, plunged into the type of epistemic confusion but able 'with the aid of *very special gifts*' to penetrate straight to the heart of the maze(p.83). In the end however the glamour of the rhetoric masks little more than an almost formulaic reductionism. The centre of Barth's maze is not described, but undoubtedly is the 'core perception' that life itself, all 'reality', is fictive: the only theme, after all, of both Borges and Barth.

But of course this 'perception' carries little weight against realism as a literary mode, since whether life is 'fictional' or not, its textuality, its semiology (physical, gestural, verbal and lexical) is *phenomenal*, and realism is essentially concerned with the phenomenology of existence. Moreover, 'the 'postmodern turn' is, if nothing else, the reflexive recognition that the semiological is the very stuff of experience.

In short then the whole stylistic issue as presented in Barth's essay rests on epistemological presuppositions which never even begin to engage with realism as a postmodern aesthetic possibility, only with the concept as a historical demon to be epistemologically exorcised. Consequently, the sceptical Idealism of Barth which is the motive force behind the formal and epistemic dislocations and experimentation in his fictions is also the yardstick used by him to measure the 'modernity' of contemporary texts, again harnessing, conveniently and polemically, the metaphysical critique of a rival epistemology contained in 'The Literature of Exhaustion' to a by no means essentially (though perhaps historically) correlative literary mode. Perhaps not surprizingly, then, the general attempt to establish a coherent postmodern mimesis, or adequate 'rapport with reality', may be seen as being primarily an aesthetic consequence of this initial metafictional emphasis on epistemic ultimacy-as-originality, the shift a clear response to an epistemic rather than typological challenge. In reacting against the 'straw man' of a 'literature of exhaustion' the new fiction itself becomes typologically banal, tied as it is to an epistemological stake far more rigid and reactionary than any consonant with literary realism as such; having far more in common with the conceptual absolutism of Naturalism, in fact, since as Barth in his essay had insisted, the epistemological must govern the aesthetic in order that the necessary literature of 'ultimacy' should emerge. As Allan Lloyd Smith goes on to write:

The openness came to look like closedness, as reality balefully (and joyfully) persisted in the face of fiction's dismissal of it. Barth's 'used-upness' of certain forms came to look like an apt description of his own prose experiments, sailing off in amphorae on mythical waters. The challenge then became the *re*-attachment of words to things: in the certain knowledge of arbitrariness of signification a new kind of adequation is called for; making the shock of connection across the prised-apart worlds.<sup>8</sup>

The challenge, then, is for fiction to go beyond the 'security' of epistemic scepticism (though without necessarily abandoning that scepticism itself) and its blandly presumed corollary of formal self-reflexiveness just as metafiction went beyond the security of an existentially orientated representationalism. The

challenge is for the construction of correspondences, of 'significant relations' without any metaphysical blueprint whether of transparency or ultimacy, presence or absence.

There is then, it seems, a clear case for re-evaluating the early epistemic presumptions of American postmodern (overwhelmingly metafictional) literature, though again without necessarily abandoning the crucial grounding of such a re-assessment in what may be called the postmodern reflexive turn. The potentially farcical redundancy of fiction in the absence of this 'new kind of adequation' is seen not only in the implications of Barth's essay, but also of course throughout his fiction.<sup>9</sup>

Even in Barth's first, broadly 'realistic', novel *The Floating Opera* there can be found the seeds of a (for Barth intractable) tension between the semiological and the phenomenal, the latter all but helplessly undercutting and even deconstructing the Ideal constructs of the former. Todd Andrews' existential inquiry into his failure to commit suicide is exhaustively presented, the narrative teleology becoming that of a free-ranging pre-mortem inquest, mirroring the post-mortem psychological inquest Todd has been conducting regarding his father's suicide. Put crudely the novel is an exploration into modes of survival in the face of absurdity, in the face of *ultimacy*. It is a novel of systems, then, of modes of analysis which deconstruct life and reduce it to metaphysically meaningless components. But what is more telling than all the angst-ridden analyses of motive and action is the simple fact that Todd is 'living in the shadow of the great fact of his life' as Tony Tanner puts it, which is no great metaphysical nausea at root, but the far more banal reality (the deconstructive 'pollutant') of a weak heart.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, Todd's tortuous introspection, his sense of alienation from the rest of humanity, stems not from any painful awareness of his own fictiveness and the consequently absurd arbitrariness of life (both symptoms), but from a *physical* dis-ease. Obviously there are two very different ways of interpreting the significance of Todd's weak heart in relation to the 'metaphysic' of the book. It

can be argued that the physical ailment, doubling as the figural index of an existential, even ontological, disability clears the way for Todd to perceive 'truths' too uncomfortable for the 'healthy' to dare look into: the metaphysical 'truth' of absurdity preceding existential awareness if only revealed through it. On the other hand, the hollow (other) heart of the novel - Todd's nihilism - can be seen as central but self-deconstructive, the point being not Todd's nihilistic reasonings of ultimacy, but the phenomenal *reason* for those reasonings. The text is indeed a study of the patterns and constructs which create worlds for (even of) individuals, but Todd's constructs are themselves generated by 'the great fact' of his weak heart, by a phenomenal fact, the epistemological status of which goes beyond reasoning and, like Scherezade's predicament, touches directly on the fiction- and all construct-transcending issue of (an undeniably real) death. The implication is that underlying the complex epistemic concerns of Idealistic ultimacy is a phenomenal immediacy which has clear primacy over the constructs of validation.

The role sex plays in the novel arguably confirms this fundamentally binary reading: the account of Todd's affair with Jane Mack sets up a clear polarity between the liberating physicality of sex and the reflexive discourses attendant on it - here Harrison and Jane Mack's ambivalent sexual liberalism and Todd's own cynical sexual self-reflexiveness. It is Todd's inability to see through the intractability of this opposition that prompts his attempt at suicide, of course - ultimism once more rests on a perceived though by no means unquestionable (particularly in the context of the postmodern) polarity, a perceived dissociation between the phenomenal and the semiological, the immediate and the reflexive. Perhaps the key image in this novel is that of the young Todd bursting into helpless laughter as he catches sight of Betty June Gunter and himself in the bedroom mirror whilst strenuously losing his virginity.<sup>11</sup> For Barth, in this early work as in the later novels, the depiction of sex involves a clear distinction between basically separate, polarized modes of being, the phenomenal and the discursive, which in constantly clashing can create only the ultimacy of farce or

the ultimacy of despair, categories which for Barth are finally not at all easily separated.

In *Giles Goat Boy* Barth again effectively reworks the same perceived binary intractability through sexual farce. In a much commented-on passage we see Giles, hidden behind a bush, watching the love-making of two students, Chickie and Harry. The farce differs from the farce of Todd's laughter only in that it revolves not around the sexual act itself, but around the mode of seduction, a ludicrous and very funny blending of the ersatz epistemological (indeed, ersatz 'ultimate'):

'So it's all meaningless,' the bearded one went on. 'There aren't any Finals; there's no Dean o' Flunks at the South Exit to punish us if we don't pass. Every question is multiple choice; there's no final point or meaning in the University, it's - look here, it's like this: a naked physical fact!'

with the sexual:

'Like the Ismists say, it all comes down to distinctions in our minds; we can't ever get to the things themselves. We can thrust, and we can thrust...'<sup>12</sup>

and so on. The parody consists in the physical fact of sexual desire (the very primacy of which is being ironically denied, of course) deconstructing the reflexive 'textuality' employed as a valorizing, validating, seducing construct by Harry. The physicality of sex is then left to complete the comedy by asserting its dominance over the semiology of seduction: the seducer ends up having shot his physical as well as verbal bolt and is left helpless at the mercy of the just-gotten-started Chickie:

As is the way of does, the girl called Chickie, having Been, craved yet again to Be; put off her wools, unhobbled her udder, and pled to Harry that he school her more in that verb's grammar. He, however, seemed done with conjugating.<sup>13</sup>

This episode highlights not only the humour in Barth's work, but more importantly for the purposes of this study an almost pastoral element to it, an internal reaction as it were which tends to gnaw at Barth's disabling epistemology. At the point of the seduction scene quoted above Giles is just beginning on the road to 'humanisation' (a type of self-fictionalization) under the

all-pervasive influence of the computer/putative author WESCAC. Barth is very much pointing the finger at himself and, ironically since the pointing itself is of course reflexive, his own authorial reflexivity, finding himself guilty not of realism's alleged crime of transparency, but through a Harry-like seductive sophistry, the 'shot bolt' of 'ultimacy'. Again then, as in *The Floating Opera*, the presumption of an oppositional (between the physical and the semiological) and potentially disabling ultimacy is evident, the terms by which it operates seeming little more, in the final analysis, than re-workings of far from new binary oppositions which are in many ways out of keeping with the more fertile dissolutions of postmodernism. Barth does of course offer a dissolution of sorts in the novel - as Tony Tanner writes of Giles' final 'letting go' of his binary judgement systems after his night with Anastasia inside WESCAC:

The final sanctuary beyond all harrowing divisions, categorizations and discriminations of existence is found through love...The difference between this and his earlier notion of the seamless universe seems to be that then he tried to insist on the identity of opposites, whereas after his night in the computer he seems to have passed beyond the whole problem of meaning...It seems that he has become indifferent to his own teachings, indeed to all verbalizations of life.<sup>14</sup>

Again however, this movement on Barth's part is more evasion than true dissolution - discourse and reflexivity (Tanner's 'all verbalizations of life') are still held in implicit opposition to a strangely though familiarly naive conception of phenomenal, physical 'authenticity'. For all the apparent dissolution of polarities Barth's metafictional muse is working against itself here as surely and in many ways simplistically as it is in the farce of Todd's coital laughter, Giles' voyeurism and the minstrel of the 'Anonymiad's' 'humping the jug' - yet another figure which elides the notion of the written, the fictive, the discursive and the masturbatory, the sterile.<sup>15</sup>

Not surprisingly, perhaps, it is this working of the metafiction against itself as attemptedly pure construct which is continued and extended as the dominant feature of Barth's later 'parodic' fictions. In the title story of *Lost in the Funhouse* for example we see a clear paradigm of the metafictional (or Barthian at least)

writer's dilemma, and again sex, or the erotic, features as the figure of that dilemma. In the first place the narrative both explicitly parodies fictive conventions and uses them in order to charge the story with an ambiguous and 'erotic' sub-strata of plot, the text constantly veering from self-betraying frankness ('description of physical appearance and mannerisms is one of several standard methods of characterization used by writers of fiction'<sup>16</sup>) to narrative seduction as the reader is plunged into an adolescent sexual power play between two brothers, Peter and the ineffectual Ambrose, for Peter's girlfriend (and, we are to learn, one time seducer of Ambrose) Magda: 'Her figure was very well developed for her age. Her right hand lay casually on the plush upholstery of the seat, very near Ambrose's left leg, on which his own hand rested.'(p.79)

This pattern of revelation of technique followed by the immediate use of the technique to 'charge' the story continues throughout the text. We see Magda demonstrating 'her ability to hold a banana in one hand and peel it with her teeth'(p.81), comically echoing Ambrose's experience with her in the toolshed, the thematic 'epicentre' of the story. Ambrose's seduction provides for the dramatic, thematically sublimated tension which keeps the narrative taut on a purely teleological level, but also affirms the power of fiction to transcend contrivance through contrivance: despite technically 'showing his hand', Barth with such moments as the banana peeling scene still manages to set up comic and provocative thematic resonances in the text.

The essential rigidity of ultimacy nags here again however. The reflexivity trope works at two levels in the story, one playful and aesthetically provocative, but the other 'moral', 'ultimate'. Oppositional ultimacy in fact seems to gradually oust the playfulness as the narrative progresses; the device of Ambrose's seduction thus becomes foregrounded as a tropological 'arena' for a by now all too familiar binary separation. It emerges that at the time of his seduction,

[W]hat he'd really felt throughout was an odd detachment...strive as he might to be transported, he heard his mind take notes upon the scene: *This is what they call passion. I am experiencing it.*(p.88)

Ambrose, like Todd and Giles before him, is shown as being unable to respond 'healthily' to experience (he is in fact referred to as sickly at several points in the text). Along with Todd he is existentially cauterized, and it is only through memory and fantasy (the equivalent of Todd's introspection) that he can respond to experience. In the same way that Giles is 'artificially' aroused by the verbiage that precedes Harry and Chick's lovemaking, Ambrose is 'artificially' aroused by an obsession which leaves him, like Giles or the exiled minstrel of the 'Anonymiad', in the position of sexual outsider: 'If you knew your way around in the funhouse like your own bedroom, you could wait until a girl came along and then slip away without ever getting caught, even if her boyfriend was right with her,' Ambrose reflects. But the fact is, 'it would be better to be the boyfriend, and act outraged, and tear the funhouse apart. Not act; be'(p.87).

The final sentence, 'not act; be' articulates quite explicitly the 'moral' of the oppositions insisted on in this passage and the way in which the morality 'hijacks' the initial provocative playfulness seen in the eliding of the reflexive and the phenomenal, of 'acting' and 'being'.

Again, this oppositional dynamic invades the text's formal 'provocations' and elisions also. Towards the close of the narrative the authorial debunking of technique becomes prominent once more, but this time with more rigid intent. Instead of using Freytag's triangle to once again playfully collapse distinctions between reflexive and seductive, Barth uses it as a static counterpoint to the irresolution of the ending - an image of Ambrose as he imagines himself to be, lost in the funhouse, telling overheard stories to himself in the darkness whilst starving slowly to death, to *silence*. Ambrose becomes a (fairly predictable) type of the reflexive author, a constructor of funhouses within funhouses, but never able to partake of the 'fun', an image which is, finally, wearisomely 'moral', wearisomely 'ultimate'.

Ambrose, then, is condemned to 'acting, not being', as is Todd, the actor with an endless array of masks, and as is Giles, a goat condemned to the charade of 'manhood'. Yet another moral/epistemic dichotomy has been set up between

the semiological and phenomenal, the writer as compulsively reflexive manipulator and patterner of experience (who, like Ambrose in the toolshed can only ever in this scheme of things 'take notes upon the scene') and the lover, the unselfconscious Magda or Peter. The final sentence tells us: 'Therefore [Ambrose] will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator - though he would rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed'(p.101). The sentiment echoes in many ways Giles' reflection that what he was 'saying bye bye to' when he left the goat herd to be 'humanized' by WESCAC was nothing less than his happiness.<sup>17</sup>

From *The Floating Opera* to *Lost in the Funhouse*, then, Barth can be seen as delineating a fundamental dilemma for the epistemologically militant writer. Since fiction can, in Barth's view, only parody in its reflexiveness, 'authentic' alternatives to referential naivety are limited to one of two options: either the 'martyrdom' of silence, or a representation, a mimesis of the reflexive/parodic condition itself. Such 'solutions' very much embody 'The Apocalypse of Style' as Louis Zamora puts it,<sup>18</sup> an aesthetic of the Derridean 'glimpse beyond and the parody of parody'<sup>19</sup> and, in a phrase of Kierkegaard's perceptively applied by Tanner to Barth's later fiction, 'the despair of possibility'.<sup>20</sup> As Barth has commented on *Giles Goat Boy* and *The Sot-Weed Factor*: 'I thought it might be interesting to write a novel which simply imitates the form of the novel...In other words, it pretends to be a piece of fiction'.<sup>21</sup>

The novel as imitation of the novel is indeed the ultimate in ultimacy, but is also representative of the final epistemological exhaustion of the self-reflexive form. The ten year silence that followed the publication of *Chimera* seems the result not of any imaginative lack, but simply of epistemic exasperation, 'the despair of possibility'; after having parodied the novel form itself not once but twice, such repetition could hardly be more excusable to Barth than the epistemic repetition and exhaustion supposedly afflicting Baroque fiction.<sup>22</sup>

The shared epistemic bias of postmodern writing has not meant that the ultimacies pursued by Barth have been accepted so zealously even by fellow metafictionists, however. Gerald Graff has noted:

[T]wo strains can be discerned within the general complex of attitudes which have become associated with postmodernism: the apocalyptic and the visionary...The first strain is dominated by the sense of the death of literature and criticism; literary culture assumes a posture acknowledging its own futility. The second strain, involving the resurrection of the new sensibility out of the ruins of the old civilization, expresses hopefulness for revolutionary changes in society through radical transformations in human consciousness.<sup>23</sup>

Clearly the John Barth of the works discussed above belongs to the 'apocalyptic strain' (though in the light of his renewed career and the essay 'The Literature of Replenishment' this would seem to be no longer the case<sup>24</sup>) but the 'visionary strain' demonstrates if nothing else the possibility of positions beyond ultimacy within the postmodern context, even within the metafictional context, simply through avoiding Barth's (curiously dated after all) binary structures, his epistemological dogmatism. Jerome Klinkowitz in his study of this 'visionary strain', *Literary Disruptions*, sees Barth's epistemic rigour as actually harmful to postmodern aesthetics, the younger metafictionists having had to struggle through the potentially paralyzing sense of aesthetic fatalism fostered by Barth's theory and practice:

That a newer style of fiction did become popular in the late 1960's was beside the point, since anything designed in the wake of Barth's parody and subversion seemed a hopeless or even reprehensible cause.<sup>25</sup>

Klinkowitz goes on to establish several younger 'visionary' metafictionists including Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, Ronald Sukenick and Raymond Federman as writers who use the 'liberating imagination' as a means of countering the ultimacy of Barth. Thus, writing approvingly of Federman's novel *Double or Nothing*, he states:

Federman knows that literature fails when it claims to represent the other, so in his own novel he simply lets it represent itself. As such it is a system, an aesthetic one, but by claiming to be nothing else it becomes a real entity. Its substance is more vital because it reflects man's imagination, instead of a second hand lie about what in a whole other world is real.(p.133)

But though avoiding the sterility heralded by Barth (Klinkowitz refers to 'The Literature of Exhaustion' as 'a literary suicide note'(p.5)) the above aesthetic itself never truly escapes an epistemic ultimacy of its own: Barth's Idealism at least avoided a binary opposition between world and text as such in co-opting reality as fiction; here the naively oppositional separation of world and textuality 'liberates' only at the potentially equally debilitating cost of an absurdly separatist aesthetic. Klinkowitz alleviates this extremism by advocating a literature of 'confession', a literature not simply acknowledging its reflexivity, but actually deriving aesthetic justification from the fact of its anachronistic status. But again the epistemic precedes the aesthetic. The fictional consequence can only be yet more narratives on the case of narrative, yet more of the pure diegesis of 'the glimpse beyond and the parody of parody'.

The problem expressed by several of the writers dealt with by Klinkowitz however, the problem of establishing a 'shock of connection', a 'favourable rapport with reality', is hardly answered by such a formulation, and certainly the vision the writers themselves have of their work apparently differs significantly from Klinkowitz's. As Federman has said of his novel *The Twofold Vibration*: 'it reconnects with a certain vision of history and the self-consciousness of the text emerges only when necessary'<sup>26</sup>, and in the words of Steve Katz:

I'm sick of those passages in our work which refer however suavely to how the work is being made or how it should be made...although in a broader sense I still deal with self-referential condominiums. The former seems to be at this point like nothing more than another dull literary convention to be purged.<sup>27</sup>

Postmodern fiction, acutely conscious as it must be of the fluid interface between world and text, thing and sign, the 'broader sense...[of] self-referential condominiums', can certainly be seen as having moved beyond the despair of Barth's exhaustions, but not deeper into binary opposition and separation. Federman goes on to comment on the novel as form, and far from positing the 'new' novel as becoming ever more hermetically sealed off from reality, suggests

that 'the novel is going to reconnect with what is often claimed to be missing in my novels - not ideas, but actions'.<sup>28</sup>

In the light of Barth's more recent retreat from ultimacy and the obvious concern of Klinkowitz's 'disruptionists', or Graff's 'visionary strain', for 'a new adequation...making the shock of connection across the prised-apart worlds', the postmodern dynamic may be seen as moving towards at least exploring the gulf mapped out by contemporary epistemic scepticism, and no longer towards repeatedly emphasising its width, depth and the inadequacy of the traditional realist mimetic bridges. It is in this 'exploratory' dynamic that the postmodern 'performance' arguably finds itself as a fiction of possibility in reaction, not abeyance, to an 'impossible' epistemology.

So far it has only been the more radical metafictionists of the 1960s and '70s that have been mentioned as examples of a shift in the postmodern aesthetic sensibility from a wholly reflexive Idealism to a desire for a mimetically orientated aesthetic; a shift which has seen the dislocations of signifier and signified in the fictional sign no longer serving simply to automatically distance and dissociate, but to shock into an awareness of fresh metaphorical correspondences, a symbolic rather than contiguous 'continuity and wholeness'. Thus Federman as postmodern 'symbolist' ('my role, once I have set up the metaphor, is to decipher the meaning of that metaphor and write its symbolic meaning'<sup>29</sup>) can claim an all but classically mimetic motive for his fictions: 'I'm not destroying illusions simply for the sake of destroying illusions. I'm destroying illusions in order that we may indeed face up to reality, and now what passes for reality'.<sup>30</sup>

There is another, radically different approach to the problem of a postmodern mimesis however, an approach epistemologically consonant with but not necessarily descended from metafiction. Arguably as postmodern in spirit as any of the modes of metafiction it can be seen as revealing in its outworking the

same semiological, epistemic and ontological problematics confronted by many of the authors discussed in *Literary Disruptions*.

The epistemologically 'aware' symbolism of the intensely metaphorical 'Disruptionists' has been challenged by a new, 'aware', intensely metonymic realism, a fictional mode which is as radical a departure from the epistemologically secure realism that preceded and exists alongside it as from the 'mythical waters' of metafictional irrealism.

## 2

Postmodern realism is neither a continuation of naive representationalism nor a continuation of the irrealist response to scepticism. It is a distinctive aesthetic direction, reacting out of the aesthetic antagonism which preceded it. As Jerome Klinkowitz has noted, the nature of the new realism is not static but a 'progression':

The first point to make about experimental realism, whether in fiction or, under its more common name in painting, superrealism, is that it is not a return to simple realism. Indeed, it is not a return to anything, certainly not to the tradition of verisimilitude, but is rather a logical progression from innovative fiction in literature and abstract expressionism in art.<sup>31</sup>

Not surprisingly, then, any epiphanic quality in the new realism tends not to be existentially orientated, not concerned primarily with concepts of 'depth' and psychological/spiritual insight, since it is the very concept of the *possibility* of meaningfully communicated perception that is at stake. Instead, it seems concerned overwhelmingly with a 'surface tension', an adequation not of 'universals' to self but of a precarious, essentially contingent 'reality' to an equally precarious, contingent 'self'. The scepticism of William Gass's *Fiction and the Figures of Life* fits this new realism as well as any metafiction:

Souls, essences, the bickering legions of immortals, the countless points of view which religion and philosophy have shaped, are seldom understood as metaphorical, as expressions of our wishes and fears, as desperate political manoeuvres, strategies of love or greed, as myths.<sup>32</sup>

As Frederick Barthelme, defending the new realism in America, puts it:

As I get it, the charges against so-called 'minimalist' fiction center on some ideas of what fiction used to be, or is thought to have been. In particular, the main charges are (A) omission of big 'philosophical' ideas, (B) not enough history or historical sense, (C) lack of (or wrong) political posture, (D) insufficient 'depth' of character, (E) commonplace description too reliant on brand names, (F) drabness of 'style', (G) moral poverty.<sup>33</sup>

The epistemological tenuousness of this postmodern 'minimalist' reality as opposed to the epistemologically stable, if naive, reality assumed by traditional realism is well illustrated in Naomi Schor's essay on Balzacian realism, 'Details and Realism: *Le Curé de Tours*'. Discussing the difference between Balzac's 'sublime details' and the postmodern New Novel's 'promotion of a detail which is desacralized, detotalized and definalized'<sup>34</sup> Schor writes:

Doubtless, it has taken our modernity to shake the hegemony of the sublime...since the beginning of the twentieth century we have witnessed a far ranging attempt to desubliminate what was sublimated, an attempt spearheaded by all those, aestheticians and artists, who make up the avant-garde.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, in questioning and ultimately rejecting the basically metaphysical aesthetic common to orthodox realism, where the detail is invested with a universality of signification, (is 'finalized', is, in effect, made sublime) the postmodern sceptical turn has limited the possibilities of mimesis. The possibilities for a meaningful representation of a stable, coherent world give way (since, as Schor puts it, 'the detail can not at first have full access to the field of representation without God's guarantee'<sup>36</sup>) to the basically reflexive possibilities of either a form of 'process mimesis' where the desacralization itself becomes the aesthetic principle, or a radically sceptical 'product mimesis' which is representational, but which seeks to represent not the old, epistemologically stable world which arguably no longer even exists, but the world which has replaced it; a world stripped of all cloaks of metaphysical signification.

The former option of 'process mimesis' can quite clearly be seen as the option taken by the American metafictionists of the 1960s and '70s. As Linda Hutcheon puts it in her study of these fictions, 'Mimesis is transmutation, not reproduction...Diegesis is a part of mimesis, as Aristotle perceived'<sup>37</sup> and, in concluding that the diegetic nature of metafiction may be predicated as a form of

process mimesis: 'the roots of modern metafiction are obviously in such a realization'<sup>38</sup>.

The latter option, that of retaining the referential mode but with a new, sceptical awareness of the impossibility of any authoritative aesthetic of Balzacian 'sublime details' can be seen as being an aesthetic motive force not only in the French New Novel analyzed by Schor, but also, and perhaps most self-consciously, in a fundamental aesthetic shift of consciousness in the domain of visual art, and it is precisely this desacralizing, desublimating influence in art that Jerome Klinkowitz has taken as paradigmatic for his analysis of the rise of experimental realism in literature.

Klinkowitz's opening thesis in the essay in question, 'Experimental Realism', is in fact virtually a (more polemical) re-statement of Schor's closing remarks quoted above:

[C]ulture has in no sense regressed to the high realism of the nineteenth century...No artist of 150 years ago was faced with the plethora of highly polished reflective surfaces such as confront Abish and Estes on every urban street corner; no Victorian or Belle Epoque writers might suspect that so much of contemporary reality lay on the surface.(p.63)

The point seems valid enough: apart from clear correspondences Klinkowitz points to between the superrealists of visual art and the more overtly experimental fictional realists such as Dixon, Gangemi and Abish, other important 'new realist' writers are being linked and/or consciously see their work as being close in spirit to the new post-abstract expressionist realism in visual art. Daphne Merkin, contrasting Flaubert's comment that he was 'baffled by the psychology of (his) characters' with what she terms Frederick Barthelme's 'radical authorial bafflement' claims that Barthelme's is a 'photo-realist bafflement',<sup>39</sup> a bafflement in other words deriving not from the psychological 'reality' of the created characters but their characteristically postmodern 'delinquent'<sup>40</sup> lack of it in the face of a world of reflexive texts and codes which hide rather than reveal the existential myths of depth and authoritative because stable significations of 'meaning'. Again, in a recent interview Carver himself

acknowledges an empathy with Gerrit Henry's definition of photo-realism<sup>41</sup>: 'I think that's a fair comparison,' he says. 'I like that',<sup>42</sup> and also significantly echoing Klinkowitz's comments on Abish and Handke's 'surface' or 'reflective' mimesis, Alice Bloom writes of Bobbie Ann Mason's fiction:

Mason's prose does not work to go deeply into [her characters'] lives but to distort their surface images as though they were being reflected off loose hubcaps. Diane Arbus, not Sherwood Anderson.<sup>43</sup>

Klinkowitz's own argument proceeds along these lines of comparison, the avant-garde, postmodern spirit being identified not with an ideological homogeneity, but with what is essentially a question of perspective, of focus. The epistemologically sceptical in visual art is associated above all with a refusal to penetrate, whether psychologically, morally or figurally, and so the completely abstracted, 'pure' line of a Pollock canvas is intimately akin to the far more readily identifiable, more overtly representationalist lines which go into the making of a surrealist canvas such as Richard Esté's 'Escalator'.

The point is not one of interpretation but of the choice of perspective, the wilful myopia, the visual pathology inherent in that choice. This 'pathological', delinquent aspect of the aesthetic is traced in fiction to a 'new realism', which, bearing in mind works such as Gangemi's *Olt* or Leonard Michael's 'In the Fifties' (a section chosen by Klinkowitz as representative is given below) seems quite justifiable:

In the fifties I learned to drive a car. I was frequently in love. I had more friends than now.

When Krushchev denounced Stalin my roommate shit blood, turned yellow, and lost most of his hair.

I attended the lectures of the excellent E.B. Burgum until Senator McCarthy ended his tenure. I imagined N.Y.U. would burn. Miserable students, drifting in the halls, looked at one another.

In less than a month, working day and night, I wrote a bad novel.

I went to school: N.Y.U., Michigan, Berkeley - much of the time...<sup>44</sup>

and so on.

A similar point has been made regarding metafictional postmodernism by Philip Stevick when he compares the beginnings of Donald Barthelme's *City Life*,

Brautigan's 'The World War I Los Angeles Airplane' and Robert Coover's 'A Pedestrian Accident'. Stevick comments:

It is obvious at first that there are certain common characteristics of method, voice and sensibility in the three beginnings...a readiness to confront certain extremities of life...but an investing of these extremities with an odd and terribly distant artifice...that is very different from the classic toughness, knowingness and irony of the dominant modernists...what unites the three fictions is the common presentation of the kind of event...that *must* be led up to, or explained, or prepared for or set in context, but is, in these three cases, simply told. It is the chilling, almost pathological directness of beginning in the three fictions that is likely to seem to us most striking.<sup>45</sup>

Stevick's interpretation of course seems equally applicable to the passage from the Leonard Michael's text quoted earlier, or even to many of the less methodologically extreme fictions of Handke, Carver, Mason or Ford. The unifying principle seems to be a pathology of focus deriving from the recognition that for postmodern realism as much as for metafiction the raw material of the mimetic textual episteme is no longer psychological insight, far less a straightforward 'revealing' of the 'real'; rather the fiction must be built on the awareness 'that the materials of (such) fictions are signs', as Klinkowitz puts it(p.69).

The distinctiveness of postmodern art therefore can arguably be seen above all in its focus, in the epistemological myopia of its vision, deriving primarily from the postmodern refusal to take the epistemic security of what Schor calls 'God's guarantee' (of depth) for granted. Postmodern representationalism then will be too busy clinging to the shifting surface of a barely gravitational (in the sense of the 'mass' of meaning behind the lex) world to worry too much about digging towards whatever universal sub-strata may (or may not) lie underneath.

In fact this aesthetic overview of Klinkowitz's is, as regards the fiction of Abish, Handke, Carver and Ford, as problematic as it is useful. The analysis may be seen less as providing a truly accurate account of the postmodern aesthetic in contemporary experimental realism, and more as simply transferring the older aesthetic principles of Robbe-Grillet and other theorists of the the *nouveau*

*roman*, (which would certainly appear to mirror in principle and execution much of the thought behind the ventures in the visual arts towards new forms of 'realism') into a reading of fictions that have clearly moved far beyond the rigid epistemological principles of the French New Novel and into a certainly sceptical but also radically engaged (in an epistemological rather than in any straightforwardly ideological sense) aesthetic.

So far, all of the above analyses fit the writers under discussion quite comfortably. Abish's modes of 'distancing', of shattering any illusion of textual transparency, of characters as embodiments of existential truths, are central not just to his fictions and to Handke's, but also to the less overtly postmodern techniques of the new American realists. As Thomas LeClair has commented, 'Carver's economy is as much an artifice as Theroux's excess, a way of speaking explicitly chosen...to avoid the invisible mid-range of style'<sup>46</sup> and exactly the same could be said of Mason's exploiting of the puns, slippages and distortions foregrounding her characters' country idioms, or of Ford's mannered, parodic/gothic prose in *A Piece of My Heart*. The 'invisible mid-range of style' is characteristically absent from the work of all these writers then, but more importantly, even Abish and Handke, dealt with at some length in Klinkowitz's essay, arguably display aesthetic principles and practices far removed from the epistemological extremism ultimately advocated by Klinkowitz: 'Once we humanise, Abish implies, we become subject to the same flawed rules of communication from which his characters suffer'(p.73). This interpretation of Abish's methodology in *How German Is It*, the attributing of an anti-humanizing significance to the novel, takes the epistemological problematics foregrounded by the fiction and elevates them, in the absence of a psychological or existentially coherent 'moral' or 'message', to the status of a value, a 'comment'. In fact to see the dehumanized nature of the text (stripped as it is of any psychological depth) as an implicit comment on the desirability, or even necessity, of an equivalent response in life to the ambiguities of textualized twentieth century existence can be seen as a response not condoned by Abish, but exposed in, and indeed by, the

text of *How German Is It* as hypocritical and morally outrageous. To argue that the main significance of the book is a warning against humanizing reality is as epistemologically totalizing, and hence as reductive, (aesthetically, even morally, as well as epistemologically) as any principle underlying the *nouveau roman*.

Klinkowitz sees only an aesthetic of semiological opacity signified by the 'new Germany's' attempts to efface all evidence of the war years: 'what remains is a self-apparency of signs that mean only themselves'(p.73) he claims, but in fact 'what remains' is far more than just architectural self-apparency. The new architecture is a moral mirror, a 'depthless' surface for sure, but one reflecting (and hence still signifying) hypocrisy and a refusal to acknowledge fully the atrocities of the past: after the mass grave is accidentally revealed under the town of Brumholdstein the obvious explanation, that the bodies are Jewish victims of the Durst concentration camp on which the town was built, is consistently evaded in favour of theories of Russian atrocities against retreating German forces.

The philosopher Brumhold, in many ways the personification of this cultural and ideological aphasia, this inability on the part of the 'new Germany' to link morally loaded signifiers (such as the mass grave) to their inescapable moral and ideological signifieds, can be seen as figuring not just a form of aesthetic attitudinizing (the bias of Klinkowitz's reading), but the enormous dangers which inevitably haunt any theory that refuses to attribute moral and ideological significances to signs and things. He is certainly, on the one hand, a type of the theoretical 'New Novelist' in his arguing for the notional purity of essential 'things in themselves', as Klinkowitz argues, but finally the point is not the theoretical position itself, rather the moral ramifications and consequences of his thought. Significantly, the town of Brumholdstein, named after him, is the apotheosis of morally culpable surface realities; it is, after all, a wilfully unmarked, unacknowledged gravestone over bodies which are, by implication, as much the moral and ideological responsibility of Brumholdstein as Durst. The point Klinkowitz seems to miss is that in terms of the culpability of those who

uphold facade under a pervasive, covert ideological aphasia, the position he himself holds up as a complete contrast to the *nouveau roman* attitude of Brumholdstein can be damned by the same criticisms Abish implicitly levels at the philosopher. According to Klinkowitz:

Alain Robbe-Grillet and the other makers of the *nouveau roman* followed a somewhat similar practice [to the surface art of Abish] but with the precisely opposite goal: to capture the thing itself, the pure object now clearly seen through a purified signifier, rather than the absolute opacity of sign to which Abish and Estes aspire.(p.67)

But whether 'purity' or 'absolute opacity', the significance is the same: the desacralized detail becomes not simply divorced from metaphysical significances, from 'God's guarantee', but, should the doctrines be reduced to their epistemic extremes, the detail or sign is absurdly denied any contextualisation whatsoever. It is precisely this dehumanizing to the point of a decontextualizing of the thing that Abish satirizes through Brumhold, and Klinkowitz falls under the moral (and 'comic', as Anthony Schirato rightly terms the novel's 'deconstruction of contemporary German innocence'<sup>47</sup>) implications of the satire in applying Brumhold's treatment of the thing to the sign. The fictional theory of Robbe-Grillet and the semiological extremism of Klinkowitz's essay are essentially just the opposite sides of the same epistemological coin.

In his essay 'A Future for the Novel', Robbe-Grillet writes:

Around us, defying the noisy pack of our animistic or protective adjectives, things *are there*. Their surfaces are distinct and smooth, *intact*, neither suspiciously brilliant nor transparent. All our literature has not yet succeeded in eroding their smallest corner, in flattening their slightest curve.<sup>48</sup>

Quite clearly this statement echoes the aesthetic of surfaces which has been discussed above. Also clear however is the fact that, as Klinkowitz contends, there is a major difference in the way in which Robbe-Grillet views the concept of a world of surface reality and the way in which Abish or the other new realists would view it. For Robbe-Grillet the significance of the surface is the durability of the material thing, its aesthetic autonomy from the previously sacred hegemony of linguistic and hence conceptual signification. For Klinkowitz on

the other hand the properties of desacralized opacity are more significantly present in semiological as opposed to material reality, in the ambiguous nature of the supposed semantic correlative of the thing itself. In a very important sense however this difference is unimportant as regards the fictional outworking of the one basic dilemma both views pose from their different angles of approach: the mimetic dilemma, the dilemma central to an understanding of the postmodern progression from epistemological ultimacy and redundancy to a vital concern with adequation, with the challenge of 'the re-attachment of words to things' as Lloyd Smith puts it.

Basically, both concepts of signification rest on false ultimacies in that the governing perspective in both sets of apologetic is not truly linguistic but epistemic. This epistemic bias leads to a disturbing (given the implications of the historical, moral and political nature of the themes dealt with in Abish's novel) reductionism in Klinkowitz's essay ('The joy of self-apparent signs is the lack of hierarchy and informed meaning'(p.68)) and arguably causes Robbe-Grillet to retreat into a form of Idealism even as he is asserting the primacy of the thing itself over the false constructs of significance that the human mind, especially through art, attaches to material reality: 'The contact, then, which the novelist makes with the material presence of objects in the world via his imaginative faculties', Patricia Deduck tells us in her elucidation of Robbe-Grillet's theories, 'is what, in essence, creates the reality of the world and its objects in the novel'.<sup>49</sup> In both cases therefore the epistemological ultimacy seems inadequate when dealing with what is, after all, on the most basic of levels, a context-constructing as well as constructed, and, in the postmodern text, more or less reflexively construct-revealing art form: fiction. In other words, the epistemic extremism is inadequate in dealing with the *implications* of a world of multivalently referential signifiers. Klinkowitz, even when discussing a novel wrestling with the implications of the dislocation of the holocaust from the signs of the modern world can only rejoice in the significances of 'the lack of hierarchy and informed meaning' in the semiological world, the very view of language which can re-write

history, the very 'aesthetic' which can hide a concentration camp under a fortress of middle-class complacency and historical indifference. As Gavin Edwards writes of postmodern fiction's relationship to semiological dislocation: 'It's a game of hunt-the-referent which you always lose. Some people enjoy losing; some people find the circles vicious.'<sup>50</sup> Indeed, examples of this 'hunt' in the new realists are almost invariably of the 'vicious' kind. Thus Carver's Ralph Wyman and Handke's 'left-handed woman', both wandering through an urban maze of dislocated, dissociating signs<sup>51</sup>, and more extensively Mason's post-Vietnam novel *In Country* which sets up several 'hunt the referent' games, all challenging epistemic 'hierarchy and informed meaning', though the challenge can be malignant as well as liberating: the government's resistance to fixing a diagnosis, an 'informed meaning' to the empirical signifiers of Emmet's apparent Agent Orange poisoning; Sam's attempts to understand her dead father through his diaries and through the again empirical and futile course of mimicking his experiences 'in country' by hiding out in the swamp; finally the 'pilgrimage' to the Washington Monument, a nation's ur-referent to an overwhelmingly vicious, futile search for the most slippery referent of all - ideological stability.<sup>52</sup> In the same vein so many of Richard Ford's characters, often Vietnam veterans, in both his novels and stories live outlaw lives of a seemingly helpless restlessness and rootlessness; life itself as 'hunt the referent', and again the circle is one of deprivation rather than liberation, loss and not release.

The gulf between Klinkowitz's (basically metafictional) attitude and the new realists seems to lie in just this distinction of Edwards' then. It is, arguably, a distinction between the atrophying or the furthering of the postmodern dynamic in the furnishing of it with a truly postmodern mimesis, a mimesis not of what Roland Barthes ironically termed 'the romantic heart of things' but of power codes, of the texts which compose and reflect the synthetic nature of so much of modern life cut adrift from 'God's guarantee' of epistemic security.

Both Klinkowitz and Robbe-Grillet, then, tend to conflate all significances, whether social, psychological or ideological as simply constituent parts of one

scorned principle: the metaphysical, a process by which all notions of 'clarity' and 'opacity' as applied to things and signs become, again, *ultimacies*.

The postmodern realistic mode, as seen in Abish, Handke and the new American realism is characterized by the same epistemological scepticism that underlies both these ultimacies, but the fundamental difference is that the scepticism is integral to the text, not reliant on the epistemic 'knowingness' which must be brought to the 'New Novel', nor on the ultimist, ultimately sterile diegesis of metafiction. The scepticism is inherent in the very use to which contiguity and referentiality are put. The texts do not simply deny semiological and epistemic contiguity, nor do they parody it through excess as does Barth for instance. Rather they use it in ironic, *restless* as opposed to playful ways; ways which emphasize less a gleefully welcomed disintegration of meaning under semiological anarchy, more the terrible vulnerability of connection, the real dangers inherent in an uncritical, 'ultimist' embrace of ideologically and morally precarious indeterminacies.

In the fiction of any of these writers the hallmarks of postmodernism are more or less evident: 'discontinuity and openendedness and contingency',<sup>53</sup> hallmarks shared of course by both metafiction and the *nouveau roman*. But whereas these characteristics serve a playful, resolutely non-referential irrealism in metafiction, in the new realism of Abish, Handke, Ford and Carver the openendedness is as much disconcerting, even threatening (though still potentially liberating); the discontinuity is as alienating as it is potentially revitalizing. The contingency does not naively signify only the unlimited possibilities of an undefined and so textually untrammelled self<sup>54</sup> but the semiological dissociations of what may be termed epistemologically dislocated existence.

In Carver's story 'The Student's Wife' this distinction is particularly harrowingly seen. The narrative opens by deceptively setting up a secure, comforting, 'classical' opposition between a 'pure' textuality (Rilke's lyrics) and a

prosaic, seemingly contained (in implicit opposition to the 'spillage' of semiology/dream) reality:

He had been reading to her from Rilke, a poet he admired, when she fell asleep with her head on his pillow. He liked reading aloud, and he read well - a confident sonorous voice, now pitched low and somber, now rising, now thrilling. He never looked away from the page when he read and stopped only to reach to the nightstand for a cigaret. It was a rich voice that spilled her into a dream of caravans just setting out from walled cities and bearded men in robes. She had listened to him for a few minutes, then she had closed her eyes and drifted off.<sup>55</sup>

But this 'classical' opposition, so well poised, is, as in any postmodern text, primarily an occasion for its subversion: the safe harmony of the 'balance', its securities structured four square on an epistemic presumption, is progressively and ruthlessly dismantled by Carver. The implicit proposition of the first paragraph, that the semiological is 'other' is systematically inverted. Whereas in metafiction the inversion often works to celebrate the anarchic possibilities heralded by the breaking of the classical text/being divide, the release from 'grand narrative' to discourse<sup>56</sup>, Carver's inversion works to show the terrible, heartbreaking (heart also as figure of identity, the 'centred' self) lostness consonant (for the 'innocent') with such a dissolution. Thus we find that far from 'securing' the couple, the husband's reading is in fact a masking of a fundamental division and alienation:

He went on reading aloud. The children had been asleep for hours, and outside a car rubbered by now and then on the wet pavement. After a while he put down the book and turned in the bed to reach for the lamp. She opened her eyes suddenly, as if frightened, and blinked two or three times. Her eyelids looked oddly dark and fleshy to him as they flicked up and down over her fixed glassy eyes. He stared at her.(p.94)

The faintly grotesque picturing of the wife's face in this second paragraph is soon followed by further indications of dislocation in the relationship, a type of the dislocation in the semiological relationship of textuality to the 'real' we have simultaneously, through the same tropes, been initially (mis)led to assume as being secure:

Then: 'Make me a little sandwich of something, Mike. With butter and lettuce and salt on the bread.'

He did nothing and he said nothing because he wanted to go to sleep. But when he opened his eyes she was still awake, watching him.

'Can't you go to sleep, Nan?' he said, very solemnly. 'It's late.'

'I'd like something to eat first,' she said. 'My legs and arms hurt for some reason, and I'm hungry.'

He groaned extravagantly as he rolled out of bed.

He fixed her the sandwich and brought it in on a saucer. She sat up in bed and smiled when he came into the bedroom, then slipped a pillow behind her back as she took the saucer. He thought she looked like a hospital patient in her white nightgown.

'What a funny little dream I had.'

'What were you dreaming?' he said, getting into bed and turning over onto his side away from her. He stared at the nightstand waiting. Then he closed his eyes slowly.

'Do you really want to hear it?' she said.

'Sure,' he said.(pp.94-5)

That the nature of this dislocation is rooted firmly in the postmodern irony which simultaneously emerges as permeating the opening passage soon becomes evident. A series of exchanges take place, all based on the wife's attempts to engage the husband, to be 'located' with him, through *narrative*, through a conscious textualizing of experience: her dream, her memory of a camping holiday as newly-weds, 'one of the best times they'd ever had', her memory of growing pains, her list of favourite things. All these narratives desperately strain to achieve the security-through-narrative promised by the opening passage: "Do you remember that time we stayed overnight on the Tilton River, Mike? When you caught that big fish the next morning?" She placed her hand on his shoulder. "Do you remember that?"; and:

'O God, yes,' she said, wiggling her toes, glad she had drawn him out. 'When I was ten or eleven years old I was as big then as I am now. You should've seen me! I grew so fast in those days my legs and arms hurt me all the time. Didn't you?'

'Didn't I what?'

'Didn't you ever feel yourself growing?'

'Not that I remember,' he said.(p.97)

When all these attempts fail she gets up, leaving her husband sleeping, and, significantly, turns to textuality again, (it is interesting that Carver 'doubles' this passage very carefully with the opening one, with the same mention of cars passing outside and an ironic counterpointing of the husband's performance against the wife's distracted 'paging') though this time for security, or comfort, through diversion:

She looked in on the children. She pulled the covers up over her son's shoulders. She went back to the living room and sat in the big chair. She paged through a magazine and tried to read. She gazed at the photographs and then she tried to read again. Now and then a car went by on the street outside and she looked up. As each car passed she waited, listening. And then she looked down at the magazine again. There was a stack of magazines in the rack by the big chair. She paged through them all.(p.99)

Even the wife's watching of the sunrise is loaded with a clear ironic commentary on the false textual securities which have underpinned so much in their marriage, its degeneration now mimicking a deconstruction of that semiological artificiality:

When it began to be light outside she got up. She walked to the window. The cloudless sky over the hills was beginning to turn white. The trees and the row of two-story apartment houses across the street were beginning to take shape as she watched. The sky grew whiter, the light expanding rapidly up from behind the hills...she had seen few sunrises in her life and those when she was little. She knew that none of them had been like this. Not in pictures she had seen nor in any book she had read had she learned a sunrise was so terrible as this.(p.100)

The semiological ('not in pictures she had seen nor in books she had read') and the phenomenal are not only intimately but terribly bound together in this passage as in the narrative as a whole. If, Carver seems to be implying, there is no 'ultimate' separation to be made between being and textuality, then the narrative potencies of fiction are not simply a release from the 'mythic' limitations of essential identity, totalizing facticity and the 'Truths' of 'grand narratives'; they are also a deprivation of the 'innocent' securities which once deferred can deconstruct *lives* in a postmodern world such as Carver's, not just aesthetic complacencies in the postmodern funhouses within funhouses of metafiction:

She went through the dim apartment, back into the bedroom. He was knotted up in the center of the bed, the covers bunched over his shoulders, his head half under the pillow. He looked desperate in his heavy sleep, his arm flung out across her side of the bed, his jaws clenched. As she looked, the room grew very light and the pale sheets whitened grossly before her eyes.

She wet her lips with a sticking sound and got down on her knees. She put her hands out on the bed.

'God,' she said. 'God, will you help us, God?' she said.(p.100)

It is this deprivation or deferment that lies behind the fact of so many of Carver's stories being haunted by questions which are never answered,

explanations which are never articulated. *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, for instance, ends in a typical state of semantic paralysis with the story 'One More Thing'. The story, like 'The Student's Wife', focuses (though here far more explicitly) on the disintegration of a marriage and can perhaps be seen as a last ironic parting shot at the title of the collection, ending the book as it does with:

L.D. put the shaving bag under his arm and picked up the suitcase.

He said, 'I just want to say one more thing.'

But then he could not think what it could possibly be.(p.284)

L.D.'s confusion, linguistic, existential and social is perfectly captured in these few spare lines; the fracturing of communication is not a new topic in postmodern fiction, but what is distinctive in both this fragment and in 'The Student's Wife' is the uncompromising contextualizing of the semiological within the representational, metonymic domain of the social in a way which captures not only the *fact* of a disjunction between word and world, but also its phenomenal implications in an unsophisticated blue-collar world where meaning and interpretation are not negotiable epistemic counters, but all too often, life-breaking absences.

Again, in a less harrowing though equally 'realistic' manner Richard Ford constructs his story 'Communist' in a way which seems to exploit straightforwardly representationalist tropes and yet which in fact subtly employs through the very nature of those tropes textually reflexive, even textually dissociative strategies. On the one hand there is the very 'simple', 'naive' vernacular narrative constructing a basically linear series of metonymically revealed significances: on this level the narrative is simply a story of a mother's failed love affair and the 'rite of passage' into adulthood its failure comes to represent for her son, the narrator. But on the other hand we find this 'secure' linear patterning disrupted at several key points, points where attention is drawn to a more fundamental 'dis-ease' in the narrative - the unease created by a

radical dislocation between the narrator-as-youth, as teller, whose voice (concrete, naive, descriptive) we hear almost throughout the text:

Glen looked back at me and his face was distorted and strange. The air around him was full of white rising geese and he seemed to want them all. 'Behind you, Les,' he yelled at me and pointed. 'They're all behind you now.' I looked behind me, and there were geese in the air as far as I could see, more than I knew how many...The air around me vibrated and I could feel the wind from their wings and it seemed to me I could kill as many as the times I could shoot - a hundred or a thousand - and I raised my gun, put the muzzle on the head of a white goose, and fired.<sup>57</sup>

and the invasive, ambiguously 'knowing' and yet detached voice of the narrator-as-commentator, as meta-narrator so to speak: 'the door slammed behind her and he looked at me then with a look I think now was helplessness, though I could not see a way to change anything'(p.228-9) and 'I could only see the small, dark top of her head, low in the back seat of the Nash, staring out and thinking what I could not then begin to say'(p.231).

Very simply what these disruptions achieve is a haemorrhaging, as it were, of the metonymic, linear narrative's significances. Such intrusions situate the realm of significance not within or behind the narrated events, but within the 'now' of the narrator's commentary. Invariably there is the implication that the narrator could *now* 'begin to say', but for some reason still does not. 'Meaning', then, far from being a disguised presence, the presence of classic realism, becomes subtly 'in excess' of the linear narrative's authority.

The significance of this story arguably resides then not in a traditional mimesis whereby certain events are selected and thereby become contiguously revelatory, metonymically figural. Rather it resides in a 'slippage' or perhaps more accurately elision of narratives whereby the linear telos, far from *containing* figural 'meaning' becomes itself a figure, a trope. Thus the 'delinquent' conclusion-denying *boy's* narrative of 'Communist' can be seen as a textual figuring of the 'negative meaning' of the 'adult', commentating narrative - this 'negative meaning' being a postmodern condition of dissociation. Thus the extreme metonymy of the boy's narrative is typologically *aphasic*, not simply prosaic:

A light can go out in the heart. All of this happened years ago, but I still can feel now how sad and remote the world was to me. Glen Baxter, I think now, was not a bad man, only a man scared of something he'd never seen before - something soft in himself - his life going a way he didn't like...I don't know what makes people do what they do, or call themselves what they call themselves.(pp.242-3)

The metonymy is a form of narrative 'protection', a meta-mode so to speak, reflexively mirroring a protective self-enclosure best illustrated by the boy's response to Glen's attempt at getting to know him, at getting beneath the (typically postmodern) opacity of his defensiveness, an opacity and defensiveness shared by Glen, the communist, the 'other', always suppressed, under threat from the dominant, but always there, 'everywhere now':

There were communists everywhere now, he said. You didn't know them, but they were there...He said that communists were always in danger and that he had to protect himself all the time. And when he said that he pulled back his VFW jacket and showed me the butt of a pistol he had stuck under his shirt against his bare skin...And we kept walking. Though in a while he said, 'I don't know much about you, Les. But I'd like to. What do you like to do?'

'I like to box,' I said. 'My father did it. It's a good thing to know.'

'I suppose you have to protect yourself too,' Glen said.

'I know how to,' I said.

'Do you like to watch TV,' Glen asked, and smiled.

'Not much.'

'I love to,' Glen said. 'I could watch it instead of eating if I had one.'

I looked out straight ahead over the green tops of sage that grew to the edge of the disked field, hoping to see the lake Glen said was there. There was an airishness and a sweet smell that I thought might be the place we were going, but I couldn't see it.(pp.232-3)

Ford's text, however 'realistic', enters the realm of the postmodern not simply by adopting a 'theme' of dissociation, then, but rather by mirroring such a dissociation, even *creating* such a dissociation, within the text itself through rupturing the secure *then* of the text with a typologically destabilizing, deconstructive *now*.

Abish too confronts this dimension of semiological dislocation on intensely metonymic, 'realistic' grounds, though *How German Is It* is of course far more historically and culturally focused than the personal or domestic 'flashpoints' of alienation, dissociation and dislocation characteristic of the American 'dirty

realism'.<sup>58</sup> But the text is as 'time-haunted' (and to the same end of epistemic disjunction) as Ford's 'Communist', though for Abish it is the 'then' that ruptures the text's 'now'. It is also, of course, 'question-haunted', like so many of Carver's narratives, and as with Carver's questions we are never given any answers which are not open-ended, multivalent and indeterminate. Again, Abish's characters are as threatened as Carver's (or Ford's) by their own sense of personal or existential contingency. Ulrich Hargenau is a 'man without qualities', a writer (significantly) out of touch with his identity, his society and above all his ambiguous history (he is officially the son of a German nobleman executed by the Nazis, but in fact is illegitimate) all of which casts him existentially adrift. 'We were all in need of fortune tellers,' Jayne Anne Phillips writes at the opening of her story 'Rayme - A Memoir of the Seventies',<sup>59</sup> and Ford has Frank Bascombe in *The Sportswriter* acting on that need. Ulrich instead turns to hypnosis, but the impulse is similar to that felt by the threatened selves of Phillips' West Virginia, Mason's Kentucky, Ford and Carver's Mid-West. Common to all is the insistent depiction of crises of identity in a terrifyingly contingent history and world. Ulrich, a peculiarly and chillingly 'I-less' type of the postmodern author, never needs the terrible moment of realization common to the American new realists' epistemologically 'innocent' men and women without qualities, but the book ends with the symbolic, or iconic crystallization (rather than an 'epiphanic' realization) of his equally fundamental dislocation: 'I returned to my car' he tells the psychoanalyst he visits at the close of the novel, 'musing over the fact that had I arrived at the bridge a minute sooner I would have died without knowing my real name'.<sup>60</sup> Then he is hypnotized:

And Ulrich, who felt pleasantly relaxed, slowly raised his arm, perhaps for no better reason than a desire not to impede the hypnosis, or a wish to please the doctor. For no other reason...He knew, he was convinced, he was positive that he was not a good hypnotic subject as he opened his eyes, with his right hand raised in a stiff salute.(p.252)

Existing somewhere between the 'innocents' of the 'dirty realists' and the European aesthetic self-awareness of Abish's Ulrich, Peter Handke's

protagonists also find themselves dissociated from themselves and others through the impenetrability of the (post)modern world's reflective semiological surfaces, the texts which surround them and cut them off from meaning and contextualization. Joseph Bloch of *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* begins the novel in a state of typical 'new realist' alienation:

When Joseph Bloch, a construction worker who had once been a well-known soccer goalie, reported for work that morning, he was told that he was fired. At least that was how he interpreted the fact that no one except the foreman looked up from his coffee break when he appeared at the door of the construction shack.<sup>61</sup>

The situation is wholly postmodern; the 'firing' itself is indeterminate, our reading of Bloch's interpretation of the foreman's sign is wholly open-ended, Handke never telling us the facts of the case. Bloch's life-changing dilemma is precipitated by nothing more than an indeterminate, finally opaque, multivalent sign. Again, there are intimations of a dislocation, of a dissociation of self: one of the first things we learn about Bloch is a 'sign' from his past, his 'textual' identity as a well-known soccer player as opposed to a psychological characterization. His identity as a soccer player has the security of a public, 'coded' identity in much the same way that a Victorian realist could provide a character with a security of identity through the codes of 'God's guarantee' in humanism and moral rationalism. By the time Handke's narrative opens however this security of being has passed, and in a very short time even the secondary security of a working identity has been removed or forfeited. It is only a small step from here to Ford's restless drifters, Mason's culturally shipwrecked rural Southerners, Frederick Barthelme's 'eccentric' (in the full sense of the term), mysteriously dispossessed narrators. And it is no coincidence that like Joseph Bloch so many of Carver's characters are presented in a characteristically 'Handkean' state of indeterminacy, between jobs, drying out, in the midst of or recovering from failed marriages, in the wake of arbitrary death.

For Robbe-Grillet, the postmodern open-endedness of the text is absolute, his things in themselves, severed from all humanizing referentiality and

significance stand at the very edge of an epistemological and (theoretically at least) phenomenological vacuum. Arguably however, for Abish, Handke and the American writers under discussion the open-endedness of the text implies not an absolute shearing off of significance, but the necessary incompleteness of an interface. The postmodern realist text is not the self-contained world-onto-itself of the epistemologically secure, 'well made' texts of 'high realism'; neither is it the equally epistemologically complacent, equally self-contained Idealist icon of the self-referential metafictional text. But whereas Robbe-Grillet, an early initiator of a desacralized realism, starts from a conception of the object which is, ironically enough, as metaphysical (since it is, in effect, designed to render the object as meta-social, meta-personal and meta-functional; ultimately therefore meta-physical,) as any held by earlier realists under 'God's guarantee' the new American realism is prepared to start from the phenomenal texts of life. The inarticulate discourses of divorce, alcoholism, redundancy common to this new realism are far from rarefied, are in fact meticulously concretized, naturalized, social situations, though no less textual for that: Wittgenstein's 'rough ground' as opposed to the 'slippery ice' of ultimist Ideal scepticism.<sup>62</sup> Its resonances are authentically postmodern, are enigmatic and open-ended, never 'sacralized' into universality. Its 'epiphanies' are sceptical epiphanies, revelations not of any transcendental or metaphysical meaningfulness (or even *meaninglessness*) but of a root textuality which is not safely separated from life by the textual narrative, but is in fact the very texture of postmodern life itself; is, in Michel Butor's words, 'that fundamental narrative in which our whole life is steeped'.<sup>63</sup> Thus Joseph Bloch finds himself in the same state of epistemic confusion as the postmodern author, finding himself having to verbalize reality, having to textualise the visible before he can imaginatively appropriate or even simply accomodate it, since in a world where signs are not under 'God's guarantee' any more than things, the thing itself can only be 'narrated', textualized, never authoritatively *named*:

He had barely closed his eyes again when the flowers and the tea kettle were unimaginable. He resorted to thinking up sentences about the things instead of words for them, in the belief that a story made up of such sentences would help him visualize things.<sup>64</sup>

This dislocation of the ability to name, to semiologically fix, that Bloch is undergoing is once again paralleled in typical 'dirty realist' texts. Here the stories themselves perform Bloch's 'archetypal' dissociation, their narratives characteristically forming around the absent centres where meaning, where 'fixture', is expected: absent names, absent identities, of things as well as people. Such narratives (common to any of the contemporary realists so far mentioned, and several besides) often settle on a physical signifying focus which invites and yet resists valorization - a place (Shiloh, Alaska or Rock Springs); the act of taking a bath; bicycles, muscles and cigarettes.

Carver's story 'The Bridle' throws a great deal of light on this recurring trope. At a key moment in the narrative, the first mention of the bridle, we see the narrator, on impulse, writing her name on each one of a bundle of one hundred dollar bills:

I watch them unload their boxes, suitcases and clothes. Holits carries in something that has straps hanging from it. It takes a minute, but then I figure out it's a bridle. I don't know what to do next. I don't feel like doing anything. So I take the Grants out of the cashbox. I just put them in there, but I take them out again. The bills have come from Minnesota. Who knows where they'll be this time next week?...They could go anyplace, and anything could happen because of them. I write my name in ink across Grant's broad old forehead: MARGE. I print it. I do it on every one. Right over his thick brows. People will stop in the middle of their spending and wonder. Who's this Marge? That's what they'll ask themselves. Who's this Marge?(p.421)

The linkage is not incidental. At the close of the story the family has moved on, but the bridle, their 'sign', or 'referent', has been left. Again it is an irreducibly 'physical' significance and as such denotes the familiar 'absence' noted above; but through the subtle linking of the marking of the notes and the appearance of the bridle this absence becomes consonant with lack, with a lack of integrated identity, of secure being, which physical referents (the bills, the bridle) can semiologically 'carry' but not, as in traditional, 'symbolic' realism, redeem. Thus the bridle does not finally figure as a valorizing, *fixing* referent of

the Hollits family, but as an inducer of movement, of (in the context of the sort of movement seen in the story) dis-location, displacement, a dynamic of absence consonant with the 'diffraction of the self, [the] transgression of the identity principle'<sup>65</sup> which is the dynamic behind Marge's signing and 'dispersing' of the bills. Instead of the physical-as-denotive, as revelatory, we find the physical-as-dislocative opacity, in the same way that Bloch confronted with the flowers and the tea kettle does. Both bills and bridle induce a 'diffraction' rather than security and fixture, a diffraction where 'the subject is dispersed...enmeshed within and finally lost among the endless relay of signification, the infinite substitutions in the chain of the signifier'.<sup>66</sup> One thinks of Marge's 'they could go anyplace and anything could happen because of them', her figural 'losing' (or loosing) of her 'identity' to 'the infinite substitutions in the chain of the signifier' ('I can imagine one of the Grants finding its way out to Waikiki Beach, or else some other place. Miami or New York City. New Orleans. I think about one of those bills changing hands during Mardi Gras...(p.421)) represented by the endless transactions ('infinite substitutions in the chain') involving the bills. Much the same can be said of the bridle, and indeed of the postmodern realist text itself, the metonymic 'physicality' of which is fully consonant with the semiological diaspora-inducing 'physicality' of its objects:

'Bridle,' I say. I hold it up to the window and look at it in the light. It's not fancy, it's just an old dark leather bridle. I don't know much about them. But I know that one part of it fits in the mouth. That part's called the bit. It's made of steel. Reins go over the head and up to where they're held on the neck between the fingers. The rider pulls the reins this way and that, and the horse turns. It's simple. The bit's heavy and cold. If you had to wear this thing between your teeth, I guess you'd catch on in a hurry. When you felt it pull, you'd know it was time. You'd know you were going somewhere.(p.433)

In another story of Carver's, 'Why Don't You Dance', we see this semiological/epistemic dislocation and the dynamic of 'diaspora' that results very clearly. The story opens with a disrupting of codes, the domestic codes which equate 'bedroom suite' with anything but 'front yard'. A simple but highly effective inversion has occurred, an epistemic dislocation whereby all the things

that are taken for granted as signifying domesticity and privacy (bedroom furniture) have been wrenched out of their textual context and harnessed to a new, dissociating 'text': that of the public, open significance of a front yard. And this dislocation takes the form of dispersal; what was in is now, disturbingly and desperately, out:

In the kitchen, he poured another drink and looked at the bedroom suite in his front yard. The mattress was stripped and the candy-striped sheets lay beside two pillows on the chiffonier. Except for that, things looked much the way they had in the bedroom - nightstand and reading lamp on his side of the bed, nightstand and reading lamp on her side.(p.187)

The disruption continues as a young couple arrive and assume that the scenario signifies a yard sale. Again two codes clash, one a 'code' of dispersal and the other a 'code' of structuring, of accumulation - we are told that 'this girl and this boy were furnishing a little apartment'. It is no surprise to find at the end that like Joseph Bloch and Ulrich Hargenau the girl has undergone an experience of semiological, even *epistemic* dislocation; a gulf has opened up between signs she has never needed to articulate previously (since they have been epistemologically 'guaranteed' by her domestic presuppositions) and their new, ambiguous and even disturbing re-alignment and consequent divestment of 'identity'. The result is a postmodern need to articulate, to somehow reaffirm the 'naming spell', to narrate *out* of this '*mise en abyme*': 'She kept talking,' the story ends. 'She told everyone. There was more to it, and she was trying to get it talked out. After a time, she quit trying'(p.191).

Abish is characteristically more overt in his exploration of the problematic nature of communication in a semiologically dislocated, textual world, where the text has a reflexively paradigmatic rather than simply interpretive or referential relationship with reality:

The innovative novel is...a novel of disamiliarization, a novel that has ceased to concern itself with the mapping of the 'familiar' world, for to do so would compel the characters to adopt a perception of the everyday predicated on an unquestioning affirmation of the function and role of the 'self' in society, as rigidly governed by the 'reality principle' and as subsumed by the logic of everyday existence as we are.<sup>67</sup>

In principle this aesthetic of 'disfamiliarization' fits the fiction of both Handke and the new American realism quite comfortably, and though Abish's style and methodology is very different from, say, Carver's, the following comment on Abish's 'Minds Meet' where Harry shoots a bank teller because he embarrasses him by playing on the confusion of codes in criminal cliché ('Dough, mocks the teller. What do you think this is, a bakery?'<sup>68</sup>) could very easily be recast to fit the situation of the girl in 'Why Don't You Dance' (and for that matter Bloch in *The Goalie's Anxiety*):

Abish emphasizes that the familiar in an aberrant situation is enough to destroy orientation: that the violent act of shooting the bank teller is a result both of exasperation with the familiar, and of the shock of discovering it juxtaposed with unfamiliarity.<sup>69</sup>

In all these 'new realist' writers then we can see a definite shift away from both the metafictional and *nouveau roman* orientations (which in their different ways equally foreground the author/text relationship) towards a foregrounding of what might initially be broadly termed a text/world relationship. This is achieved not through representationalism as such however, but through a paradigmatic contiguity between the fictional text and the texts of the phenomenal world.

In short then the novel or story can 'represent' the world meaningfully not because the text falsifies its textuality and masquerades as an invisible, transparent vessel of either metaphysical or existential 'truth', but because the world is not other than the text in the way that 'high realism' has more or less supposed. This is a result not of the text becoming ever more 'lifelike', whether through transparency or through the theory of the 'novel as action' proposed by Katz, Federman and Sukenick,<sup>70</sup> but of the world becoming ever more text-like. The world/text dichotomy which has haunted twentieth century aesthetics no longer properly exists in the fictions of the new realism. What is represented in postmodern realism is, typically, textuality. Its themes are the phenomenal effects and moral/ideological implications and consequences of that textuality, whether in the humble domestic sphere of Carver's fictions, the intensely

personal, psychotic sphere of Handke's tragedies or the socio-historical, ideologically engaged sphere of Abish's sceptical dissections of a whole culture. Aesthetically, what now exists in these postmodern epistemes is a world/text *interface*.

Postmodernism has arguably come of age in the fiction of Abish, Handke and Carver in that it is no longer about, but *of*, a reflexive condition of life. Handke writes his fictions then 'in a world defined by Wittgenstein, Chomsky, and other theorists of language and reality', not *about* such a linguistically self-conscious, postmodern world, and so it does seem to be the case, as Klinkowitz claims, that 'if the self-reflective works of Ronald Sukenick, Gilbert Sorrentino, Robert Coover and Steve Katz represent innovative fiction in its adolescence, Handke's work serves as a good example of what the post-innovative novel may be like'.<sup>71</sup>

It would appear therefore that a postmodern mimesis, or engagement with reality, is made at least possible by the new realism. A mimesis not of the postmodern author's *dilemma*, (a mimesis which is pure diegesis in its self-consciousness and so which loses all mimetic impact) but of the postmodern *condition*. The dilemma is not so much central as integral to the fiction of the new realism, whether European or American; it has ceased to be the disabling epistemic concern it was for the Barth of 'Lost in the Funhouse' and also the formal concern it was for the 'Disruptionists'. For the new realists the awareness of reflexivity remains, and is implicitly acknowledged, not simply to highlight the postmodern author's predicament but to highlight the more important issue of the problem of contact, contact with the past through the texts of history, with morality through the texts of ideology, power and desire, with contemporary society through the texts of cultural discourse, with the self through the tangled deferments of 'identity'.

This postmodern mimesis is perhaps best seen, as was argued earlier, as a synthesized progression from the epiphanic tradition of realism and the radical

epistemic scepticism of metafiction, thus avoiding the sterility of the *nouveau roman's* attempts to forge a self-consciously postmodern form of realism by generating the necessary 'interface' between reader and text without abandoning the reflexive awareness of textuality. The mimetic 'shock of connection' is therefore characterized by both product and process mimesis, and it is this integral duality that is ignored by Klinkowitz in his essay on the new realism, by the novelists of the *nouveau roman* and 'Barthian' ultimism.

This duality is the essence of the 'sceptical epiphany', the 'lateral' epiphany of signs as opposed to the 'vertical' epiphany of transcendence or existential insight. As Carver observes in his essay 'Fires': 'I'd had, I realized later, an insight. But so what. What are insights? They don't help any. They just make things harder'.<sup>72</sup> The mimetic contact is achieved not through the supposed referential (in its psychological or 'truth-telling' representational sense) potential of the text, but through a 'performative' dimension akin to Hortwig Isernhagen's 'pragmatic dimension of the text...its *Leserappell*'<sup>73</sup>; basically its phenomenal or interactive qualities which communicate not a referred-to world of stable, sacralized meanings, but its own interaction as text with text; a 'performing' not of 'meaning' but of 'significances':

The most fundamental way in which the form can, then, mirror the themes of loss is through a denial of that activity of ordering that is automatically ascribed to everyday languages as well as to more conventional literary ones as their basic function: semantic reference. In the terms of Charles William Morris's semiotics, the semantic dimension of the fictional text breaks down or becomes unstable. There results a shift to (again in Morris's terms) the pragmatic dimension of the text: its interaction with the reader, its *Leserappell*; one might also say, there occurs a shift from meaning to significance.<sup>74</sup>

The concept of this 'pragmatic dimension,' this '*Leserappell*,' is a useful one for beginning to theoretically 'picture' the strategies that the texts of postmodern realism use in order to 'relate' to the world and progress from the epistemological quandaries that condemned much of metafiction's attempts at escaping from a progressively more trite self-reflexiveness to failure. The scepticism is still clearly present and there is therefore no return to a pure

'product mimesis' of meaning rather than significance; the strategy is not representational but pragmatic. Abish, certainly, is explicit about the contrived nature of the fictional Germany he has created in *How German Is It*, and yet on the other hand is not willing to push this aesthetic given to a purely reflexive freeing of the text from all strings of (epistemic, ideological, historical and moral) significance. The iconic, the signs we live by, are no less significant and affective for their irreducibly 'textual' as opposed to 'essential' nature. After all, as Abish concludes the novel: 'Is it possible for anyone in Germany, nowadays, to raise his right hand for whatever reason and not be flooded by the memory of a dream to end all dreams?'(p.252).

The text should be seen therefore as drawing attention not to the text as pure artifice, pure aesthetic play, but to the text as, despite its inherent artificiality, significantly and affectively *relating to*, performing as opposed to representing in any 'high realist' sense, the dynamics of an equally textual, also phenomenal, textually *determining* as well as determined, world. As Carver puts it in his essay 'On Writing': 'If writers haven't taken leave of their senses, they...want to stay in touch with us, they want to carry news from their world to ours'.<sup>75</sup>

Isernhagen's concept of the *Leserappell* is derived from and applied to Modernist as well as postmodern works, and in both cases he sees a duality between product and process mimesis at work. There is, however, a valid distinction to be drawn between the mimetic function of the *Leserappell* in the Modernist and postmodernist realistic repertoires. John Updike's *The Centaur* has been read by Keith Opdahl for instance as an example of realism employing a technique of process mimesis: 'in *The Centaur* Updike uses myth for the purposes of verisimilitude, creating a more subjective and certainly more powerful mimesis'.<sup>76</sup> In other words, the irrealism of the narrative is subsumed by the greater realism of effect. This seems a good example of *Leserappell*, but the text remains distinctively non-postmodern. The *Leserappell* is generated by a psychological affinity manufactured by the text between the reader and the

characters of the fiction, which in turn makes the myth, the blatant fictiveness of the work, authoritative and mimetic. But this is of course a Modernist methodology, traceable to many more works than just its epitome *Ulysses*.

The postmodern *Leserappell* however foregrounds the semiological, not the psychological; it too utilizes a 'universal' (language itself as opposed to discrete myth) but with no pretences towards 'mythic' verities or insights into the human heart; the focus is on the surface of things, there are no centaurs lurking under the skin, only the semiological mass of the 'other' under the language:

Where Hemingway's purified style was meant to imply volumes of unspoken knowledge, like the seven eighths of an ice-berg underwater, Carver's method suggests that the other seven eighths either isn't there or isn't knowable...As in a relentless close-up, we hear and see exactly what these people do, but why they do it - or whether anything intelligible goes through their minds as they do it - we cannot confidently explain.<sup>77</sup>

as Dean Flower puts it. Or, as Abish in *How German Is It* more laconically suggests:

Could it be that an inner turmoil, an absence of serenity, an unresolved entanglement, self-doubt, self-hatred may be due to nothing more serious than a person's inability to appreciate the idyllic weather?(p.16)

The mimetic contact derives not from a 'soft' interface, maleable enough, like myth, to fit a variety of existential moulds but from a 'hard', problematic interface, capable of drawing as much attention to its intractability as to its 'universality'. In the postmodern realist text, despite its apparent referentiality, language, as relentlessly as in any metafictional work, sets its own terms: 'There were things that needed talking about,' reflects the protagonist of Carver's 'A Serious Talk', 'important things that had to be discussed...He'd tell her the goddamn ashtray was a goddamn dish, for example'(p.256).

The postmodern *Leserappell* is very much a matter of language as opposed to 'meaning', therefore, though the fact that the sign is often dislocated from meaningful (in the sense of orthodox or epistemologically secure) signification should not obscure the fact that the dynamic of the texts is, if not always towards a re-attachment or redeeming of significance, consistently directed towards

foregrounding the need or at least longing for such a re-connection. And so the narrator of Handke's *Short Letter, Long Farewell* tells us:

[W]hen in telling someone what I had just been doing I compulsively described all the partial actions of which the total was composed. If I went into a house, I never said, 'I went into the house', but, 'I wiped my shoes, turned the door handle, pushed the door, went in, and closed the door behind me'.<sup>78</sup>

As Klinkowitz comments on the above passage:

In this manner, Handke's work takes the logical next step beyond metafiction. The narrator is performing for himself the same act, with the same goal, that he would for the reader.<sup>79</sup>

It is in a form of *Leserappell* therefore that Klinkowitz identifies the moving on from metafiction, in the eliding of the semiologically problematic, paradigmatic interaction of the fictional text with the texts of the 'real'. It is here that the postmodern realistic methodology, and with it a postmodern mimesis, may be found. The fictional practice of the new realists is a practice geared above all to the exploration of and re-engagement with, the phenomenal realities of a textually shattered world.

Frederick Barthelme, recalling the enormous influence the work of the metafictionist's of the 1960s had on his own early fiction and the early fiction of much of his generation, has identified the aesthetic 'moment' of metafiction's exhaustion, and by extension the 'moment' of his own turning to a fictional re-engagement with the phenomenal, away from the 'trick...at the center':

Some people were thinking, 'Well, so much for irony.' Because once you'd been to the big 'all over' irony of the post-modern, you couldn't very well go back to the periodic...I'm not sure *everybody* was thinking 'So much for irony,' but it was talked about a lot, even though the big guys had said irony was all the way of it, the only way, said the world was broken and could not be apprehended without it. That looked and sounded right...The trick was a suspension-of-disbelief thing, with the *real* world viewed as the fiction. This is a reverse whammy: the real treated as if *it* requires suspension of disbelief, becomes unreal, and knowable (by reason of being self-determined). That trick was at the center back then, but the problem was you figured it out, and once you figured it out it wasn't interesting any more.<sup>80</sup>

And in the light of this American experience of Barthelme's, it is interesting to note that despite their working within and out of very different cultural and

even aesthetic milieus, both Abish and Handke also began their careers with work which was self-consciously metafictional: Handke with the play *Insulting the Audience* and Abish with *Alphabetical Africa*, but that even in a work as formally self-conscious as the latter, a broadly parallel impulse towards a break with the more unquestioning self-reflexiveness of the 'Disruptionists' is emergent. At the aesthetic epicentre of Abish's first novel is not an epistemological irreverence, Barthelme's 'trick', Barth's ultimacy, but a *question*, a question as to how the world outside of the text can be reached given the inescapably reflexive material of words that the writer works with, this being the point of the novel's uncompromisingly artificial construction. As Abish himself puts it, he was,

fascinated to discover the extent to which a system could impose upon the contents of a work a meaning that was fashioned by the form, and then to see the *degree to which* the form, because of the conspicuous obstacles, undermined that very meaning.<sup>81</sup>(Italics mine)

In other words, the relationship between form and meaning has become a matter of degree; the dogmatic rejection of any such relationship, or at least the significance of any such relationship, has been undermined. Richard Martin comments:

[E]ven as the eraser rubs out the physical word 'Africa', the reader is tempted to ask whether it can be true *for the narration* that Africa has ceased to exist. There is a very real sense in which words, for Abish, have power. The importance of the individual word is inextricably bound up with questions of signification.<sup>82</sup>

The keynote for Abish even in the 'extremist' *Alphabetical Africa* is not sceptical certainty but sceptical ambiguity, the same sense of ambiguity which runs through both his own and Handke's later work.

James Knowlton has noted in Handke's career 'a turning point' reached with the publication of *The Goalie's Anxiety*, a change to a fictional vision which is intimately akin to the worlds of semiological entrapment projected by Abish and Carver. According to Knowlton, Handke's earlier works are characterized by 'an obsession with the notion that language stands as a barrier, a pre-fixed, falsified system of signifiers no longer representing a coherent world' while the later works indicate:

a new direction in which more directly human concerns begin to supplant the rather abstract view of humankind found in his earlier work. In these novels of the middle period, real, living human beings suffer in the semiotic process; their alienation often stems from their inability to break through the language structures surrounding them to reach the world.<sup>83</sup>

Handke's concern, then, according to Knowlton, is to provide an answer as it were to the faintly dismissive rhetorical question posed by Alice Bloom regarding Bobbie Ann Mason's work, a question equally applicable to any of the writers under discussion:

The source of deepest terror in this novel is not the plot or the characterization, but the style; and the recurrent, pervasive image of terror is brand-name junk...When this is the junk that furnishes the words that the characters are given to think with, as though this ungodly man-made landscape of garbage were the only text available to our time, then what thoughts *can* people think? Sam is given...no language to talk or think or feel with. When Sam describes a woman she really seems to like and admire, she thinks, 'Anita smelled nice, like a store at the mall that had a perfume blower in the doorway.'<sup>84</sup>

This 'brand-name terror', Sam's 'inability to break through the language structures surrounding [her] to reach the world', though figured here through brand names, is closely identifiable with the more historically and ideologically focused semiological 'terror' lacing *How German Is It*, a novel also constantly juxtaposing human contact with the 'terror' of semiological opacity/evasion. The same alienation suffered by Handke's or Mason's or Carver's characters as a result of their 'inability to break through the language structures surrounding them to reach the world', can be found early on in Abish's novel:

One runs little or no danger in speaking about the weather or writing about the weather, or in repeating what others may have said on that subject. It is safe to conclude that people discussing the weather may be doing so in order to avoid a more controversial subject, one that might irritate, annoy, or even anger someone, anyone, within earshot.(p.11)

This sentiment, that words serve as a blanket over more brutal codes (the above passage immediately precedes an account of what Ulrich takes to be a mysterious attempt on his life) is very much the ruling spirit not only of *How German Is It* but also the works of Handke, Carver and indeed all the new American realists. The very question 'how German is it?' may be seen in fact as virtually paradigmatic for the question 'how postmodern is it?' as regards the new

realism, implying as it does: how are we to locate 'meaning' in a textual world? a question formulated in the light, or shadow, of a root contingency and vulnerability: 'If I am ever asked,' says the narrator of *Alphabetical Africa*, 'how I could erase history, I can answer at once. It's easy. I bought an eraser.'<sup>85</sup>

These are the larger, socio-political implications, but the problem bleeds down essentially unaltered into the equally contingent texts of familial and personal life, into the lives of Joseph Bloch, Carver's Joe and Arlene Miller, Mason's Sam and Emmet Hughes, Ford's Quinn in *The Ultimate Good Luck*. Whether on a national or familial or even personal scale the dynamics of the postmodern realist text are broadly the same: the struggle to apprehend significances, the struggle to elevate contingent significances to meaning; the struggles 'to break through the language structures surrounding them to reach the world'.

More often than not this 'breaking through' signifies not illumination or apotheosis however. There is a network of semantic enslavement at the heart of almost any text by these writers; a network woven between the poles of existential inarticulacy and Brumhold's dictum that 'existence does not take part within the skin'(p.18). Thus while Carver's characters for instance are presented 'concretely' enough through the physical and signal minutiae of their lives, the double sense implicit in William Stull's claim that 'nearly all Carver's characters are "ex-s" of one sort or another' is far from fanciful.<sup>86</sup> The confusion and entrapment which results is not epiphanic in the Modernist sense, by virtue of its cohering or transcendent qualities; it is 'epiphanic' by virtue of its revelation of textuality (and hence the root *différance* in semiological 'otherness'), its decoding properties, whether the message decoded (the 'otherness' revealed) is one of mute brutality, true release or simply further confusion and an extension of ambiguity. It is achieved through the typological 'self-betrayal' of the fictional text. In simultaneously coding existence as a fictional construct and decoding existence as part of that construct's function the postmodern realist text works as

a 'double agent' as it were. This is the ambivalent, restless ground of the new realism's postmodern mimesis.

Thus in *How German Is It* we see not only the ultimate example of society-as-construct, the town of Brumholdstein, the world of surfaces which Klinkowitz identified as the type of the postmodern literary 'canvas', but also that scene's epistemological 'rupturing'. In prompting an interpretive response, the disruptively unfamiliar, the 'epiphanic' (the discovery of the mass grave) decodes and deconstructs the covertly ideological texts of that response; in this case the responses of the town as a body of opinion, of Helmuth and, perhaps most tellingly of all, the teacher, Miss Heller:

Helmuth was working in his makeshift office in the house when Gisela, returning from school, raced up the stairs, eager to inform him that the diggers had uncovered a grave, some even said that it was a mass grave of German soldiers killed by the Russians during the war.

The trouble with that theory, Helmuth pointed out, was that the Russians had never reached Brumholdstein, or Durst, as it was called at that time.

Gisela stared at him blankly. Then it must have been the Americans?

Americans or the French or the English, but it is unlikely that they encountered any resistance at Durst. What did Miss Heller say in class? Or didn't she mention it?

She said, Rubbish. She said she didn't want to talk about it. She said that a lot of people were killed in the war, and that it was very sad.(p.138)

The dynamic of the novel, and of Abish's work in general, is, broadly, one of constant disruption, a constant pitting of 'humanized' against textualized reality, meaning against significance. As Bradbury observes in his introduction to *In the Future Perfect*:

We are confronted with situations that defy explanation...Abish is a writer of a world with reduced meanings...But under flatness dark meanings still hide, troubling the surface, so that the careful inquiry of writing must go on, always sceptical about itself.<sup>87</sup>

Of course this tension is also at the thematic and methodological heart of the fictions of Handke and the American 'dirty realism'. The stylistic techniques vary greatly, but the integral epistemic dynamic of the fictions is constant.

In *How German Is It* we see a wholly textualized world, a world where 'existence does not take place within the skin': Gisela and Egon, for instance, posed for the cover photograph of a glossy magazine,

Participants in an ongoing German drama...  
...Egon, in a double-breasted white gabardine suit, leaning against the car. To be precise, he was casually (incidentally, this casualness cannot be overemphasized) leaning...(p.125)

and so on. As Abish ironically comments, they are 'A picture, really, of the new democratic Germany'(p.129).

The opacity of their coded life is not constant however; their complacent status as dehumanized signs, as signifiers of the 'new Germany', is ironically undercut:

Something that is not shown is a shot of Gisela sulking...Gisela crouching in a corner of her room. An atavistic return to the corner of her childhood? Mouth tightly clenched, body perspiring, tense. Eyes focused on some distant point in space.(p.130)

'Something that is not shown': something that is not code, not surface text, but intensely existential. This is the antithesis to the thesis of opacity and textuality that so characterizes the Germany of the book, and by extension the whole postmodern condition. The synthesis is the sceptical, negativized 'epiphany' of disruption, of deconstruction: Rita, the photographer involved in the affair that sends Gisela into the corner exits the narrative in a sudden, though not really surprising, explosion of ideologically loaded violence:

In tearing the photographs out of her hands, he also tore her denim shirt. When he took the prints to the table, under the watchful eyes of Gisela, tiny dots of blood formed a beaded arc on his left cheek. Screaming, Rita lunged at him, clawing at his face, while he laughingly defended himself with one hand, with the other gripping the jumbled pile of photographs, some bent, some torn.(p.202)

The discovery of the mass grave follows directly on from the beginning of the affair, and this primary disruption is intimately linked with the 'secondary' disruptions such as the power struggle between Helmuth and Egon over Rita, and the power struggles of Helmuth and Egon *with* Rita. For instance, the photographs that Rita and Helmuth fight over are photographs of the open grave. Between the two poles of Rita's codifying, textualizing photographer's

impulse (significantly she considers titling a projected book of the photographs 'The New Germany: Brumholdstein Past and Present', the irony being on Abish's part, not her own) and Helmuth's equally questionable architect's impulse to destroy with his own built 'New Germany' all evidence of the past lies the impulse to violence. Opacity, by definition signally unyielding, when polarized can induce only conflict. The ideological opacity characterizing both Rita and Helmuth's identities is not so much deciphered as acted out, performed (a recurring motif in the novel's critique of power: '*Does Franz accurately mimick power when he apes the self-conscious buffoonery of the mayor of Brumholdstein?*'(p.158)) in a 'body-language' of violence.

Many other events in the book reinforce this presenting of signally opaque, physically performed power as not simply text, but 'the text to end all texts' (a sinister extension of Butor's 'fundamental narrative in which our whole life is steeped') to modify the concluding lines of the novel. For instance, Egon and Gisela's dog is ironically shown as a consummate product of postmodern opacity, functioning only within a matrix of 'floating' signifiers, its existence consequently lost 'among the interstices of language', the 'prolonged void between one signal and the next', helplessly contingent, in 'doubt':

Like any guard dog taught to respond instantly to a variety of urgent signals, he had grown accustomed to the uncertain existence - the state of doubt - in that prolonged void between one signal and the next.(p.126)

But the authority, the power of the signs, does not limit the physical fact of the dog's own power, they merely provide a system whereby that 'semiotic' opacity of power can be naturalized, made familiar, semiologically 'built over' just as Brumholdstein is built over Durst. We learn later that the dog has to be destroyed for devouring a neighbour's smaller dog; the coded 'familiar' text of the dog's notionally contained behaviour is ruptured by the event, a small but significant (and blackly comic) mirroring of the more obviously significant disruptions in the text: Brumholdstein becoming an unmarked gravestone, the close of the novel where all the codes of intrigue, deferment and alienation

focused in Ulrich are crystallized into the Nazi salute, the 'gesture to end all gestures', 'text to end all texts' as much as 'dream to end all dreams'.

This key notion of textuality as not antithetical to the 'representable', phenomenal 'other' of the world but as the very form, the 'fundamental narrative' of that world, can be seen equally clearly in a fairly representative 'dirty realist' text - Carver's 'Chef's House'. Here, just as in the superficially so dissimilar *How German Is It* we can identify the presence of codes which cannot be finally separated out into distinct categories of semiological and physical; rather there is a persistent fusing or eliding of the two, recalling Ford's 'Communist' where it is ultimately impossible to prise apart the apparently referential significances of the physical (the narrator's boxing, say) from the reflexive significances of the typological (the metonymic, 'protective' narrative mode). Thus in 'Chef's House' the initial 'power struggle' which is to occur between Wes, a struggling to reform alcoholic, and alcohol (or more accurately the code of the familiar, the 'text' of the alcoholic lifestyle which Wes is trapped by just as Egon's dog is enmeshed by its primitive semiological matrix of commands) is put immediately, if obliquely, into a semiological context: 'He called again and said, Edna, you can see the ocean from the front window. You can smell salt in the air. I listened to him talk. He didn't slur his words'(p.308).

Wes and the narrator, his estranged wife Edna, get back together at Chef's house (a recovered alcoholic out to help Wes) and the summer they spend together is a success. The codes that form the 'text' of a marriage are gradually re-established:

I knew better, but after being a month with Wes in Chef's house, I put my wedding ring back on. I hadn't worn the ring in two years. Not since the night Wes was drunk and threw his ring into a peach orchard.(p.308)

Communication and reciprocity are established against such 'opaque', random significances (it is interesting to note again the dynamic of divestment, of dispersal in this recollection) and the 'marriage text' becomes coherent and cohesive enough to dominate the alcoholic, 'centrifugal' code of fragmentation.

In place of divestment, we see 'accumulation' through gifts and Wes's 'taking' of the narrator into his arms:

One Sunday afternoon Wes went out to get a sprinkler and came back with something for me. He came back with a nice bunch of daisies and a straw hat. Tuesday evenings we'd go to a movie. Other nights Wes would go to what he called his Don't Drink meetings...At night, Wes would take me in his arms and ask me if I was still his girl.(pp.308-9)

But significantly these gestural codes of reconciliation<sup>a</sup> are inescapably precarious; there is always lurking the sense of 'the uncertain existence - the state of doubt - in that prolonged void between one signal and the next' which has been left behind. An underlying tenuousness is constantly indicated, the seasonal nature of the reconciliation, for instance: 'I found myself wishing that summer wouldn't end', says Edna, the inevitability of seasonal change instilling a crushing sense of fatalism into the narrative.

The feared 'crack-up' finally begins when Chef himself turns up, telling them they have to make way for his daughter. Again the dynamic of break-up, like the dynamic of reconciliation, is heralded and sustained in semiological terms. we know the bubble has burst when an alcoholic code first intrudes on the new marriage code. 'Chef said his daughter, Linda, the woman *Wes used to call Fat Linda from the time of his drinking days*, needed a place to live and this place was it'(p.309). The semiological displacement of a naming habit becomes the index to their physical displacement from the house, and, ultimately, from each other: 'Fat Linda's going to live here now instead of us, Wes said. He held his cup, but he didn't drink from it'(p.310).

Likewise the tenuousness of the 'domestic code' with which the couple have 'sacralized' the physical objects of the house is emphasized:

Wes came inside the house. He dropped his hat and gloves on the carpet and sat down in the big chair. Chef's chair, it occurred to me. Chef's carpet, even...

...We'll get another house, I said.

Not like this one, Wes said. It wouldn't be the same, anyway. This house has good memories to it.(pp.309-10)

The semiological sacralizing of the house is what matters to Wes, a man at the mercy of texts who has briefly, for a summer, found relief from the 'inability

to break through the [encoding] structures surrounding [him] to reach the world', from Abish's 'state of doubt...between one signal and the next'. Chef's house is finally one of many fictional manifestations of Carver's 'borrowed room',<sup>88</sup> the almost archetypal postmodern space and site of the new realist performance.

The rest of the story charts the inevitable disintegration, and again it takes place in a context of semiological dissociation which elides the phenomenal, physical breakdown and an epistemic, even ontological, 'seizure' of being:

He said, I'm sorry, but I can't talk like somebody I'm not. I'm not somebody else. If I was somebody else I sure as hell wouldn't be here. If I was somebody else, I wouldn't be me...

...I said his name to myself. It was an easy name to say, and I'd been used to saying it for a long time. Then I said it once more. This time I said it out loud. Wes, I said.

He opened his eyes. But he didn't look at me. He just sat where he was and looked towards the window. Fat Linda, he said. But I knew it wasn't her. She was nothing. Just a name.(pp.311-2)

The gulf which has opened up between them is a semiological divide. His name no longer 'identifies' him and evokes a reflexive opacity rather than a referential transparency. Fat Linda becomes an empty signifier, 'just a name'; the defeat is in this breakdown of 'naming' (as it was for Handke's Bloch, Mason's Sam Hughes), in the 'terror' of Abish's 'state of doubt', the real inducement to the at least doubt-free oblivion of drink.

In Handke's *Across* we see the same process enacted on a scale somewhere between the historical/cultural generalities of Abish and the domestic particularities of Carver. In a key scene preceding his murder of a man daubing swastikas on trees we find the protagonist, Loser, kicking up political sign-boards along a canal bank. The soon to follow murder and the vandalism are clearly connected. There are undertones of a disruptiveness which goes far beyond vandalism in his small war waged on the signifying world: not only are there links with the murder (apart from anything else, the murdered man is in one sense simply an erector of political 'sign-boards') but also hints of the moral ambiguity latent in such an impulse (setting aside for a moment the obvious moral problems raised by murder). 'No one was watching me, and if they had been, they might have thought they were witnessing some anonymous official act',<sup>89</sup>



Loser tells us, a reference certainly to the totalitarianism lurking under the destruction of signs as surely as under the erection of certain signs. The threatening dynamic is the same: the binary polarizing of the ambiguous, contingent texts of life against the 'crystallized' semiology of 'action'; not revelatory, 'epiphanic' action, rather the disruptive breaking through of the textual matrix into an 'unknowable' opacity, the incarnation in violent action of Alice Bloom's 'terror(ism)' (one thinks of Bloch's murder of the cinema cashier, prompted as it is by his frustration at her 'impenetrably' phatic conversation). It is the opacity evoked in Frederick Barthelme's recognition 'that experience itself was a language, even if it was a language mostly unknowable'.<sup>90</sup>

'Chef's House' ends with Wes pulling the drapes and shutting out the ocean. It is an image of a retreat into the extreme epistemic 'security' of the alcoholic, the final glimpse of his defeat by 'textuality', by his inability to live in a desacralized world. It mirrors Ulrich's final gesture, his Nazi salute. Both endings reveal the eruption of codes sublimated through the length of the lisible narrative. Both are more or less 'iconic' moments which crystallize in action the 'fluid' semiological tensions and ambiguities that haunt the 'referentiality' of the fictions. Both reveal the 'terror' of the crucial interface between the textual and the 'real', and both texts, in embodying this interface in themselves, occur as both referential and reflexive. As Irving Malin says of Abish, he is 'less interested in plot and character...than in the *words* which contain them',<sup>91</sup> and as Wes puts it for himself, 'I'm sorry, but I can't talk like somebody I'm not'.

The mimesis of such an interface then may be seen as both a 'product' and 'process' mimesis, neither identifiable with the pure diegesis of metafiction nor, as Marc Chenetier comments, the unreflexive 'tit-for-tat, sign for thing journalistic investigation into the existence of mainstream alienation and the marginality of the self' of traditional, psychological realism.<sup>92</sup> These 'interfacial' texts deal with epistemic elision, not the ultimist polarizations of opacity and transparency.

A recurring figure in Handke's *Across* is that of the threshold; Loser in fact describes himself as 'a thresholdologist (or seeker after thresholds)'(p.11) and of course the threshold is a form of interface, a figure which finally takes us beyond the binary, oppositional terms of ultimacy and towards a 'rhetoric' more suited to the exploratory dynamics ('every step, every glance') of the new realist aesthetics:

For a threshold, he says, is not a boundary - boundaries are on the increase both in inner and in outer life - but a precinct...Every step, every glance, every gesture, says the teacher, should be aware of itself as a possible threshold and thus recreate what has been lost.(p.67)

Against the 'literary suicide note' of postmodern ultimacy then, it is possible to hold in almost direct opposition the far more fruitful texts of a new, equally postmodern apprehension of what an adequate, mimetic literature in such an age might mean, and above all it means not exhaustion and silence, but the *Leserappell* of narrative, of *story*: 'You see I've noticed', Loser reflects, 'there's no better way of getting people to tell stories than to ask them about thresholds'.(p.70)

### 3

In the introduction to his bio-bibliographical guide to postmodern fiction Larry McCaffery, commenting on the variety of Modernist influences on the new fiction, writes that:

looming over the entire literary landscape, is the figure of James Joyce, the Dead Father of postmodern fiction, who must be dealt with, slain, the pieces of his genius ritually eaten and digested.<sup>93</sup>

And indeed, so far it has been in the context (or shadow) of Joyce, or at least of European Modernism, that both Richard Ford's and Raymond Carver's fiction has been set. The epistemic contextualization undertaken in the preceding sections has been with reference first to implicitly post-Joycean metafictional fabulation and then to the very European postmodern realism of Abish and Handke, writing as they seem to be in the Modernist wakes of Mann and Musil in particular.

The reason for this is simply that postmodernism, like Modernism before it, has generated an epistemological homogeneity, however variously that epistemic unity may be incarnated through differing fictional methodologies. As David Lodge comments on the Modernist Stein:

[T]he point I want to stress about Stein's work is this: though *The Making of Americans* and *Tender Buttons* tend toward the opposite poles of metonymy and metaphor, they are both recognizably 'modernist' and both pursue the same general artistic aim - to render that elusive quality, 'existence'.<sup>94</sup>

As regards more recent literature we find John Barth basing his critique of 'exhaustion' on an Argentinian fabulist, an Irish minimalist and an exiled Russian aesthete, finding convincing epistemic correspondences between all three, despite the obvious methodological contrasts between, say, Beckett and Nabokov.

The two previous sections of this chapter have largely passed over questions of methodological heterogeneity in order to highlight these important epistemic correspondences which, as has been argued, occur not only within the loose ranks of the metafictionists but also within the emergent phenomena of a new, postmodern realism. But to approach Carver's work primarily epistemologically, or even 'internationally', is, in a very significant sense, to bastardize it. American postmodern realism has its own supremely influential 'Dead Father' 'who must be dealt with, slain...ritually eaten and digested'; not Joyce but Hemingway.

In moving on from the generalizations of this introductory chapter the legacy of Hemingway's re-shaping of the American realist tradition becomes ever more central to anything like a full appreciation of the new American realism's aesthetic radicalism. Consequently this study will now focus most closely (though not exclusively) on the work of just two of its most representative voices, since it is arguably these voices, Raymond Carver's and Richard Ford's, that have most clearly and self-consciously 'ritually eaten and digested' their 'dead father', in markedly different ways but to perhaps surprisingly, and certainly significantly, similar ends.

What distinguishes postmodern fiction from other contemporary fiction which is mindful of Modernism's achievements is, to stretch McCaffery's metaphor, the extent of digestion. The nature of postmodernism's digestion and organic transmutation of Modernism is twofold, is both epistemic and stylistic, and, crucially, does not lead simply to a 're-hashing' of Modernist premises and ambitions in either sphere, but to both ritual assimilation and, equally importantly, ritual excretion. Those writers still working in a broadly 'Modernist' mode, such as Bellow and Updike, tend to re-work a distinctly Modernist methodology of reconciliation, supremely evident in Joyce.

Craig Werner, in his book *Paradoxical Resolutions: American Fiction since James Joyce*, analyses this trend in depth, discovering the Joycean pattern of resolution between the poles of romance and realism, the natural and the symbolic, the metaphoric and the metonymic in many major contemporary texts, including the perhaps obvious examples of Bellow's *Herzog* and Updike's *The Centaur*. More interesting however is the attempt made by Werner to include several unmistakably postmodern writers in his claim that though

writers of this generation only occasionally 'copy' specific aspects of Joyce's work...[tracing] their literary lineage more directly to either Wright or Faulkner... the aspects of Faulkner's and Wright's work which seem most appealing to them are those which parallel the romantic-realistic reconciliation pioneered by Joyce.<sup>95</sup>

The claim is interesting because when held against Werner's in-depth analyses of specific postmodern texts not only is its inadequacy as a general formulation for a postmodern aesthetic made clear, but more importantly it throws into relief the sort of approach which could be more fruitful. For instance, in order to fit Sukenick in to his synthesis of Joycean legacies, Werner has to concede the all-important fact that 'Ronald Sukenick's *98.6*, while sharing the desire for a constructive interaction between symbol and reality veers off towards ultimate, though...*not unintentional*, irresolution'<sup>96</sup>(Italics mine). In other words, though Sukenick is engaging with the familiar dialectics of Modernism, that fact being Werner's justification for including him in the 'resolutions' thesis, his aesthetic attitude to those classic polarities is far from

Modernistic, or reconciliatory. Werner's problem, which lead him into this self-contradiction over Sukenick, is his failure to take into account the essentially dual nature (assimilation/excretion) of postmodernism's development from its undoubted roots in classic, Joycean Modernism. Thus, Werner, committed to a thesis of 'paradoxical resolutions', is left with several critical 'indigestibles'. For the new realist writers Modernistic resolution (the epiphanic) is itself simply one vector in the search for a postmodern adequation, a postmodern 'paradoxical resolution'; the classic synthesis of the mythopoeic has been recast as only a constituent of less certain 'post-dialectical' explorations. Werner is left with a 'split' thesis: on the one hand the Joycean lineage is intact in postmodern literature, as seen in ongoing attempts to extend formal innovation, linguistic playfulness and the exploitation (though for different ends) of the mythopoeic; on the other hand of methodological significance, the lineage is not - the hallmark of the great European Moderns, the struggle for epistemic inclusiveness, for resolution, is absent.

To usefully approach the question of postmodern debts, and from there to address Carver's debts to Hemingway as 'Dead Father', then, a very different critical methodology is required. One such approach is David Lodge's *The Modes of Modern Writing* where postmodern American literature is discussed not in terms of a thematic reconciliation between the principles of romance and reality, but in terms of typological discriminations between, and exploitations of, the semantic modes underlying Werner's terms: metaphor and metonymy. In short, Lodge defines the general characteristics of a postmodern methodology as being posited not on reconciliation, but on omission, on a typological extremism (again, Lloyd Smith's 'brain damage'). As Lodge puts it:

[I]t [postmodernism] seeks to find formal alternatives to modernism as well as to antimodernism. The falsity of the patterns imposed upon experience in the traditional realistic novel is common ground between the modernists and the postmodernists, but to the latter it seems that the modernists, too, for all their experimentation, obliquity and complexity, oversimplified the world and held out a false hope of somehow making it at home in the human mind.<sup>97</sup>

And so, whereas Werner uses *The Centaur* to establish thematic 'proofs' of the continuity of structural resolutions through Joyce, Lodge draws attention to textual 'proofs' which illustrate structural irresolution in postmodern writing: 'The Unnameable...is representative of a text in which the narrator is condemned to oscillate between irreconcilable desires and assertions'(p.229); sexual ambivalence in *Giles Goat Boy* and Federmann's *Double or Nothing* is pointed to as a signifier of the binary oppositions embedded and elided in the texts' structures, as are the stock postmodern devices of alternative narratives, random text generation and reception, and so on. Lodge's discussion of metaphor and metonymy as binary poles is concluded with a study of the extremism to which the structuralist concept of that polarity has been appropriated by postmodern fiction, and the implications are clear: the structural typologies underlying Werner's notion of 'paradoxical resolutions' are open to and have undergone aesthetic exploitations which themselves structurally govern the epistemic significances of the text. In other words, though a Modernistic aesthetic of reconciliation may find new formal and thematic ways of merging the two structural forces into a necessarily mythopoeic whole, a postmodern aesthetic tends always towards a recognition (explicit or implicit) of the structural typologies as textually determinative, or even deconstructive (as a result of their essentially binary nature) imperatives. Thus Lodge sees postmodern fiction as an attempt to 'deploy both metaphoric and metonymic devices in radically new ways'(p.228) and, far from subsuming such deployments under a single banner of 'resolution', Lodge offers in conclusion the following possible 'headings' for an attempt at classification: 'Contradiction', 'Permutation', 'Discontinuity', 'Randomness', 'Excess' and 'Short Circuit'. Lodge, arguably, shows clearly the contradictory, disruptive nature of the crucial structural and linguistic dynamics of continuity and reaction characterizing postmodernism's debts to Modernism, dynamics fuelled by an eclectic and yet sceptical assimilation, not extension. The broadly New Critical position that Werner adopts is useful in discussions of a

textual icon such as *Ulysses*, but is inevitably strained when applied to an aesthetic which is, in its modal extremism, performative rather than iconic.

The preceding section closed with Handke's claim that: 'Every step, every glance, every gesture...should be aware of itself as a possible threshold and thus recreate what has been lost'. And indeed, the struggle for fictional and yet meaningful adequation mapped out in the earlier sections can be seen as being resolved not through classic Modernistic resolutions at all, but through an aesthetic grounded in the narrative act, and that act functioning not as metaphor but as coherer, looking not to unite or resolve mythopoeically, but to offer a means, grounded in metonymy, of communication from one side of the Saussurian gulf to the other.

In a very similar way, using a methodology which clearly foreshadows Carver's own (though essentially foreign to Abish's and Handke's) Hemingway also of course more than any other Modernist foregrounded the act of narration itself as an epistemologically and aesthetically homogenous, self-sustaining imperative. Hemingway had no need of the imposed, extraneous mythopoeic framing common to, say, Joyce and Faulkner, for the aesthetic fulfillment of his fictions. This is, in essence, why for Carver as postmodernist, the Modernist 'Dead Father' he has had to ritually 'deal with' and assimilate has been the writer of, in James Mellard's words, 'the cooler, performative exhibits' of *In Our Time* and *The Sun Also Rises* rather than the "'classic" modernist...iconic' *Dubliners* and *Ulysses*.<sup>98</sup>

But just as the iconic, mythopoeic tradition of Joyce has been assimilated and transmuted by John Barth, the vernacular performative tradition has been 'dealt with' by the new realism of Carver; his fictions are no more an extension of performative Modernism than they are of iconic, 'Wernerian' Modernism. The problematics involved in understanding his postmodern debts can, however, only reasonably be unravelled in the methodological light of Hemingway and Anderson.

## Notes to Chapter One

- 1 Both 'postmodern' and 'mimesis' are of course problematic terms, perhaps particularly when brought together. Rather than attempt a (maybe impossible) definition of the former, however, this study has itself worked towards a fairly broad 'articulation', engaging with several theoretical formulations more or less critically.  
The term 'mimesis' is also used fairly flexibly, more in line with the the notion of Aristotelian 'correspondence', Auerbach's pluralistic conception of the representation of 'epistemes' and Linda Hutcheon's re-instatement of diegetic, or 'process' mimesis in her *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Waterloo, Ontario, 1980) pp.36-48 than of any more rigidly referentialist formulations.
- 2 Allan Lloyd Smith, 'Brain Damage: The Word and the World in Postmodernist Fiction', in *Contemporary American Fiction*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury and Sigmund Ro (London, 1987), pp.39-52 (p.41).
- 3 The Derridean undertones of Sukenick's irrealist 'in excess' aesthetic are clear. See, for instance, Alan Bass's introduction to Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (London, 1978), pp.ix-xx (p.xvi): 'Every totality...can be *totally shaken*, that is, can be shown to be founded on that which it excludes, that which would be in *excess* for a reductive analysis of any kind'.
- 4 Ronald Sukenick, *Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure* (New York, 1967), p.3, quoted in 'Brain Damage', p.42.
- 5 John Barth, 'A Dialogue: John Barth and John Hawkes', in *Anything Can Happen*, edited by Tom LeClair and Larry McCaffery (Urbana, 1983), pp.9-19 (p.18).
- 6 John Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion' in *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury (Manchester, 1977), pp.70-83 (p.73). This essay first appeared in *The Atlantic*, 220 (1967), pp.29-34, and is also reprinted in Barth's *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (New York, 1984) but Bradbury is used here for ease of reference. All further references to this essay will be given in brackets after quotation.
- 7 See, for instance, 'An Interview with Raymond Federman' in *Anything Can Happen*, pp.136-42.
- 8 'Brain Damage', p.41.
- 9 'Farcical redundancy' is intended at least partially as a 'technical' term and not simply perjoratively. See footnotes 18 and 19 for further amplification.
- 10 Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (London, 1971), p.232.
- 11 John Barth, *The Floating Opera* (London, 1981), pp.126-7.
- 12 John Barth, *Giles Goat Boy, or, The Revised New Syllabus* (London, 1967), p.34.
- 13 *Giles Goat Boy*, p.34.
- 14 *City of Words*, pp.251-2.

- 15 John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice* (London, 1969), p.169.
- 16 *Lost in the Funhouse*, p.78. All further references to this text will be given in brackets after quotation.
- 17 *Giles Goat Boy*, p.9
- 18 Louis Zamora, *Writing the Apocalypse: Historical Vision in Contemporary U.S. and Latin American Fiction* (Cambridge, 1989), pp.97-120.
- 19 Hilary Lawson, *Reflexivity: The Post-Modern Predicament* (London, 1985). 'The Glimpse Beyond and the Parody of Parody' is a sub-title in her chapter on Derrida, pp.90-125 (p.109). See also *Narcissistic Narrative* pp.48-56 and Margaret Rose, *Parody/Metafiction: An Analysis of Parody as a Critical Mirror to the Writing and Reception of Fiction* (London, 1979).
- 20 *City of Words*, p.259. It is interesting to compare this notion of 'possibility' with Barth's own notion of 'cosmopsis' as he defines it in his *Robert Musil, Master of the Hovering Life* (New York, 1978), pp.195-6.
- 21 John Barth in *The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers*, edited by Joe David Bellamy (Illinois, 1974), pp.1-18 (p.18).
- 22 Of course a 'mimesis' of just this epistemic 'failure', as opposed to the ultimate diegetic reaction of silence is possible. This is one way of viewing not only the aphasic humiliations of many of the new American realism's characters, but also a metafictionist such as Donald Barthelme. See Lee Upton, 'Failed Authors in Donald Barthelme's *Sixty Stories*', *Studies in Modern Fiction*, 26 no.1 (1984), pp.11-17.
- 23 Gerald Graff, 'The Myth of the Postmodernist Breakthrough', in *The Novel Today*, pp.217-249 (p.218).
- 24 John Barth, 'The Literature of Replenishment' in *The Friday Book*, pp.193-20. Barth prefaces the essay in this collection with a repudiation of the sort of epistemic 'ultimism' which he has been charged with following the publication of 'The Literature of Exhaustion', and though his repudiation clearly applies to this study also it seems perfectly valid to continue to read this earlier (polemical, after all) essay from the point of view of historical 'influence' rather than with any 'intentionalist' scruples.
- 25 Jerome Klinkowitz, *Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction* (Urbana, 1975), p.7. Further references to this text will be given in brackets after quotation.
- 26 Raymond Federman, 'An Interview with Raymond Federman' in *Anything Can Happen*, pp.126-151 (p.141).
- 27 Steve Katz, quoted in Jerome Klinkowitz, 'Aspects of Handke - the Fiction', *Partisan Review*, 45 (1978), pp.416-425 (p.416).
- 28 'An Interview with Raymond Federman', p.141.
- 29 'An Interview with Raymond Federman', p.129.
- 30 'An Interview with Raymond Federman', p.142.
- 31 Jerome Klinkowitz, 'Experimental Realism', in *Postmodern Fiction: A Bibliographical Guide*, edited by Larry McCaffery, *Movements in the Arts*

- Series, 2 (New York, 1986), pp.65-79 (p.63). Further references to this text will be given in brackets after quotation.
- 32 William Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (New York, 1971), p.5.
  - 33 Frederick Barthelme, 'On Being Wrong: Convicted Minimalist Spills Bean', *New York Times Book Review*, (April, 1988) pp.1 and 25-27 (p.1).
  - 34 Naomi Schor, 'Details and Realism: *Le Cure de Tours*', *Poetics Today*, 5 (1984), pp.701-9 (p.708).
  - 35 'Details and Realism', p.708.
  - 36 'Details and Realism', p.708.
  - 37 *Narcissistic Narrative*, p.43.
  - 38 *Narcissistic Narrative*, pp.153-4.
  - 39 Daphne Merkin, 'The Plight of Reading: In Search of the New Fiction', *Partisan Review*, 51 (1984) pp.739-50 (p.746).
  - 40 The term 'delinquency' is employed here and elsewhere in this study as denoting the wilful 'pathology' of the postmodern focus on the 'real'. See 'Experimental Realism' and Jerome Klinkowitz, 'Aspects of Handke: The Fiction', *Partisan Review*, 45 (1978) pp.416-25. It also alludes to a typological extremism, or aphasic sensibility which is discussed more fully in Chapter Two of this thesis. Finally its sense as used here overlaps, though is not wholly consonant with, Allan Lloyd Smith's use of Barthelme's title 'Brain Damage'.
  - 41 See Edward Lucie-Smith, *Superrealism* (Oxford, 1979), p.7: 'In Photo Realism, reality is made to look so overpoweringly real as to make it pure illusion: through the basically magical means of point-for-point precisionist rendering the actual is portrayed as being so real that it doesn't exist'.
  - 42 Raymond Carver, Interview with Kasia Boddy, Edinburgh, 1987. An edited transcript of this interview, omitting the remark quoted here, appears as Kasia Boddy, 'A Conversation: Interview with Raymond Carver', *London Review of Books*, 10, no.16 (1988), p.16.
  - 43 Alice Bloom, Review of *In Country*, *New England Review and Bread Loaf Quarterly*, 8 (1986), pp.513-525 (p.519).
  - 44 Leonard Michaels, 'In the Fifties', *I Would Have Saved Them If I Could* (New York, 1975), pp.59-60, quoted in 'Experimental Realism', p.68.
  - 45 Philip Stevick, 'Scheherezade runs out of plots, goes on talking; the King, puzzled, listens: an Essay on New Fiction', in *The Novel Today*, pp.186-216 (p.188).
  - 46 Thomas LeClair, review of Raymond Carver, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, *Contemporary Literature*, 23, no.1 (1981), pp.86-91 (p.87).
  - 47 Anthony Schirato, 'The Politics of Writing and Being Written: A Study of Walter Abish's *How German Is It*', *Novel*, 24, no.1 (1990), pp.69-85 (p.69).

- 48 Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'A Future for the Novel', in *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, edited by David Lodge (London, 1985), pp.466-472 (p.469).
- 49 Patricia Deduck, *Realism, Reality and the Fictional Theory of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Anais Nin* (Washington, 1982), p.65.
- 50 Gavin Edwards, 'Crabbe's So-Called Realism', *Essays in Criticism*, 37 (1987), pp.303-320 (p.303).
- 51 See 'Will You Please Be Quiet, Please', in *The Stories of Raymond Carver* (London, 1985) pp.174-177 and Peter Handke, *The Left-Handed Woman* (London, 1986) pp.40-42.
- 52 Bobbie Ann Mason, *In Country* (London, 1986)
- 53 Richard Rorty, 'Against Belatedness', *London Review of Books*, 5, no.11 (1983), pp.3-5 (p.3).
- 54 See 'Ronald Sukenick', in *The New Fiction*, pp.55-74 (p.61).
- 55 Raymond Carver, 'The Student's Wife' in *The Stories of Raymond Carver* (London, 1985), p.94. All further references to Carver's stories will be, unless otherwise stated, to this edition and page numbers will be given in brackets after quotations. Again, this edition is used for ease of reference as it is the only widely available edition of the first three major collections in this country.
- 56 See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Theory and History of Literature, 10, translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester, 1984).
- 57 Richard Ford, 'Communist', in *Rock Springs* (London, 1988), p.237. Further references to this story in brackets after text.
- 58 This pungent term is Bill Buford's, see 'Editorial', *Granta* 8 (1983), pp.4-5.
- 59 Jayne Anne Philips, 'Rayme - A Memoir of the Seventies', in *Granta* 8 (1983), p.35. A revised version of this story titled 'Rayme' appears in Phillips' *Fast Lanes* (New York, 1987).
- 60 Walter Abish, *How German Is It* (London, 1983), p.251. All further references are to this edition and will be given in brackets after quotations.
- 61 Peter Handke, *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*, translated by Michael Roloff (London, 1977), p.7.
- 62 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1953), Part 1, Section 107, p.47.
- 63 Michel Butor, 'The Novel as Research', translated by Gerald Fabian, in *The Novel Today*, pp.48- 53 (p.50).
- 64 *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*, p.16.
- 65 Peter Currie, 'The Eccentric Self: Anti-Characterization and the Problem of the Subject in American Postmodernist Fiction', in *Contemporary American Fiction*, pp.53-69 (p.59).
- 66 'The Eccentric Self', p.64.

- 67 Walter Abish, 'On Aspects of the Familiar World as Perceived in Everyday Life and Literature', paper read by Abish at the Second International Conference on Innovation/Renovation in Contemporary Culture, quoted in Richard Martin, 'Walter Abish's Fictions: Perfect Unfamiliarity, Familiar Imperfection', *Journal of American Studies*, 17 (1983), pp.229-241 (p.238). See also Tony Tanner, 'Present Imperfect', *Granta* 1 (1979) pp.65-71 for an incisive reading of Abish's fiction pre-*How German Is It*.
- 68 Walter Abish, 'Minds Meet', *Tri-Quarterly*, 26 (1973), p.60, quoted in 'Perfect Unfamiliarity, Familiar Imperfection', p.232.
- 69 'Perfect Unfamiliarity', p.233.
- 70 See, for instance, Raymond Federman, in *Anything Can Happen*, p.141, also *Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow* (Athens, Ohio, 1981) and Clarence Major, *Reflex and Bone Structure* (New York, 1975).
- 71 Klinkowitz, 'Aspects of Handke: The Fiction', p.416.
- 72 Raymond Carver, 'Fires', *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories* (London, 1985), p.33.
- 73 Hortwig Isernhagen, 'Modernism/Postmodernism: Continuities of a "Split" Repertoire of Narrative Themes and Strategies', in *Critical Angles: European Views of Contemporary American Literature*, edited by Marc Chenetier (Carbondale, 1986), pp.15-28 (p.25).
- 74 'Modernism/Postmodernism', pp.25-26.
- 75 Raymond Carver, 'On Writing', *Fires*, p.24.
- 76 Keith Opdahl, 'The Nine Lives of Literary Realism', in *Contemporary American Fiction*, pp.1-16 (p.5).
- 77 Dean Flower, review of Raymond Carver, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, *The Hudson Review*, 29 (1976), pp.281-2 (pp.281-2).
- 78 Peter Handke, *Short Letter, Long Farewell*, translated by Ralph Manheim (New York, 1977), p.25.
- 79 Klinkowitz, 'Aspects of Handke: The Fiction', p.419.
- 80 'On Being Wrong', p.25.
- 81 Walter Abish, quoted by Klinkowitz in *The Life of Fiction* (Urbana, 1977), pp.67-8.
- 82 'Perfect Unfamiliarity', p.232.
- 83 James Knowlton, in *Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide*, p.390.
- 84 Alice Bloom, 'Review of *In Country*', p.521.
- 85 Walter Abish, *Alphabetical Africa* (New York, 1974), p.114.
- 86 William Stull, 'Beyond Hopelessville: Another Side of Raymond Carver', *Philological Quarterly*, 64, no.1 (1985), pp.1-15 (p.5).
- 87 Malcolm Bradbury, introduction to Walter Abish, *In the Future Perfect* (London, 1984), pp.ix-xiii (p.xiii).

- 88 'Fires', p.31.
- 89 Peter Handke, *Across*, translated by Ralph Manheim (London, 1986), p.35.
- 90 'On Being Wrong', p.25.
- 91 Irving Malin, 'In So Many Words', *Ontario Review*, 9 (Fall-Winter 1978/9), p.112.
- 92 Marc Chenetier, 'Living On/Off the Reserve: Performance, Interrogation and Negativity in the Works of Raymond Carver' in *Critical Angles*, pp.164-90 (p.166).
- 93 Larry McCaffery, in *Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide*, p.xv.
- 94 David Lodge, 'Metaphor and Metonymy in Modern Fiction', *Critical Quarterly*, 17, no.1 (1975) pp.75-93 (p.85).
- 95 Craig Hansen Werner, *Paradoxical Resolutions: American Fiction Since James Joyce* (Urbana, 1982), pp.6-7.
- 96 *Paradoxical Resolutions*, p.69.
- 97 David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy and the Typology of Modern Literature* (New York and London, 1977), p.226. Further references to this text are given in brackets after quotation.
- 98 James A. Mellard, *The Exploded Form: The Modernist Novel in America* (Urbana, 1980), p.145.

CHAPTER TWO  
'WHAT WAS THERE': RAYMOND CARVER'S  
DELINQUENT MIMESIS

## 1

The early Hemingway, Hemingway the Modernist 'Dead Father', is above all preoccupied with an epistemology and methodology not of representation, or even of Modernistic resolution and adequation, but rather, following Cézanne and Stein, of a prior, unwritten aesthetic deconstruction of 'consensus reality' which could then be followed by a written re-construction; a process not designed to bind sign to thing, or even 'romance' to 'reality' as Werner would have it, but to dissolve both conventional and Modernistic bindings in the creation of a pure world of prose style. There is no room for the symbolic or imposed mythopoeic in Hemingway's early work because the prose is its own, architectural Ideality and myth.

The essence of this point is, in many ways of course, a critical commonplace; there have been innumerable studies of Hemingway's aesthetic, most, if not all, recognizing the primary importance of style in approaching the significances of his work, whether epistemic, thematic or structural. An examination of Hemingway's methodology is, however, a very necessary key to the opening up of the characteristic methodological techniques employed by American postmoderns ranging from Vonnegut to Leonard Michaels, and perhaps pre-eminently by Ford and Carver. This is not to claim that Hemingway has somehow more affinities with postmodernism than with Modernism; it is simply to claim that whereas Joyce's extreme stylistic *heterogeneity* opened a way ahead for Faulkner's fragmentations, postmodern methodological playfulness and an ongoing tradition of formal innovation, Hemingway's extreme stylistic *homogeneity* opened up possibilities for the postmodern phenomena of rigorously metonymic 'obsessional' narration, a mode which embraces narrative

strategies from the 'naive' narrations of Russel Edson to the elliptical ambiguities of Raymond Carver.<sup>1</sup> In James Mellard's words:

Having lost an ability to 'believe' in modernism's modes...For them [postmoderns, or, as Mellard terms them, sophisticated moderns] the act of writing becomes the 'reality' imitated, rather than any conventional objective reality. As performance becomes a modernist mode of reality, the rituals of authorship and storytelling become 'authorities', as well as content, and the modes of Stein, Hemingway, and Anderson have thus regained status they had lost while subjectivity reigned after Faulkner.<sup>2</sup>

Though Mellard here doesn't have Carver particularly in mind, the assimilation of Hemingway's methodology, a postmodern re-casting of his performative, resonantly metonymic mode, is a fundamental aspect of Carver's fiction. This assimilation is not significantly imitative or derivative, however; in Carver (and to a greater or lesser extent almost any of the other new, 'dirty realists') Hemingway (and the American vernacular realist tradition he, along with Stein and Anderson, transformed with his Modernism) is digested fully on behalf of the late Twentieth Century, and it is the implications of this fact rather than the fact itself which are crucial to an understanding of Carver's achievement.

There are several possible ways of approaching a comparative study of the two writers. Three approaches which most usefully serve the purpose of highlighting the 'slippage' between a distinctively Modernist and a distinctively postmodern consciousness can perhaps be isolated however. The first is a thematic study of the treatment of initiation, whether seen as an adolescent 'rite of passage' or as a more general coming to terms with, or coming into a definitive conflict with, a new order of experience. The second perspective is stylistically orientated and concerns the use of the performative mode by both writers, in particular the employment of narrative as a potential stylistic 'redemption' of existential chaos. Finally, the third approach engages with epistemic slippage at a typological level, exploring the uses of metaphor and metonymy by the two authors and consequently the nature of silence, or omission, as generated and given significance by the interaction of the two typological modes.

Many stories offer themselves for analysis as regards the theme of initiation in both writers' works. Almost all of Hemingway's stories deal with it in some form or another and a high proportion of Carver's deal (on the surface at least) with initiations into much the same felt 'ultimacies' that Ihab Hassan sees Nick Adams as being progressively initiated into, namely, 'death, evil, love and failure';<sup>3</sup> death in 'The Ducks' for instance, evil in 'Tell the Women We're Going' and 'Why, Honey?' and love and failure in almost any text of Carver's one could choose to mention.

For both Hemingway and Carver, then, initiation is a highly significant index to experience. The scale this index of initiation is 'measured' against however is not uniform for the two writers, and two very different epistemic and aesthetic 'processes' or 'phenomena' are involved when Nick Adams confronts and is initiated into the world of 'The Killers' and when Carver's adolescent protagonist Jack is initiated into the more prosaic but no less brutal world of 'The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off'. The point is not simply the differences in the static, situational backgrounds: what is far more significant is the *vector* of initiation as it were, the structural dynamics of experience. Both Nick and Jack are presented as adolescents at a critical, formative stage of their initiations into adulthood, or 'experience'; but the force of this initiatory dynamic is not simply emotional, or existential, as it would be in Sherwood Anderson for instance. It has clear epistemological implications in the works of Hemingway and Carver which serve not just to discriminate tentatively between the works, but to reveal them as generating aesthetic significances which are wholly distinct in direction and effect.

In short, Hemingway's vectors or dynamics of initiation lead inwards, culminating in an obsessive, Cézanne-like re-structuring of conventionally encoded perception. Carver's lead outwards into a de-structuring of those codes; into uncertainty, increased contiguity, the consciousness left unassimilating and unassimilated, left at the mercy of metonymous, contiguous forces which, for the

protagonists, are wholly relative and largely incoherent. Nick, wading Big Two-Hearted River, stalks his own ('stream' of) consciousness, leaning into it, braced against its current, imposing a rigid, obsessive Ideal order on the experience through the ritual of his fishing. Jack's story ends with fragmentation, with an ironic diffusion of even the tenuous coherency he had begun to impose on it by singling out Dummy's death as the most significant cause of his father's demise. The narrative itself is the supposed vindication of this teasingly arbitrary 'selection' - a vindication, a certainty or ordering which, highly significantly, the last sentence deconstructs utterly: 'But as I said, Pearl Harbor and having to move back to his dad's place didn't do my dad one bit of good, either'(p.250).

In this story of Carver's and in the Nick Adams stories we see the existential directions in which the two adolescents' initiatory experiences are taking them, and those directions, however superficially analagous, in fact run counter to each other. The shared reliance on an initiatory structure reveals fundamental contrasts between a Modernist and a postmodernist use of vernacular 'realism'; the directionally contrasting existential dynamics that can be traced result from an *epistemic* (even ontological) slippage between two structurally similar methodological modes. Those existential dynamics, then, are not simply of thematic significance. The general initiatory structures are wholly contrasting at an epistemological level. Carver's structure channels experience outwards from the dissociated self, towards a threatening, uncomprehended world of broken or dislocated codes of meaning; Hemingway's structure channels experience inwards to an epistemology of valorization, of aesthetic and stoic Idealism.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the aesthetic implications of these dynamics can be most clearly seen in the greatest of Hemingway's 'culmination' narratives (which include 'Now I Lay Me' and 'A Way You'll Never Be'), namely 'Big Two-Hearted River', where every meticulously described physical event resonates through a finely tuned artistry with ambiguous and powerful significances and correspondences - Nick setting up camp 'in the good place', smoothing out his blanket, playing the great trout that breaks free and contemplating the swamp. The epistemological

'ground' of this story is not in any conventional, iconic sense symbolic, but neither is it identifiable with an unreflexive, transparent, 'innocent' representationalism. It is clearly one of ritual, of *performance*. As William Carlos Williams puts it:

To copy nature is a spineless activity; it gives us the sense of our mere existence but hardly more than that. But to imitate nature involves the verb...we then become nature, and so invent an object which is an extension of that process.<sup>5</sup>

In 'Big Two-Hearted River' this aesthetic is fulfilled in the internalized drama of Nick's Ideal reconstruction of the physical world, his 'extension of that process' which is his psychological ritual of re-structuring. The earlier Nick Adams stories look forward to this re-structuring in that the process of initiation throughout the texts drives Nick inwards to ever deeper intimations of the maxim: 'Know thyself', and the Hemingway corollary: 'Control thyself', even 'Ritualize thyself', and, thus, the world *to* thyself. As a result there is never any real externalization, or more accurately socialization, of moral existence. Ole Anderson in 'The Killers' for instance has a complete lack of faith in an outside world of possibilities, of undetermined potentials:

He looked at the wall.  
'There ain't anything to do now.'  
'Couldn't you fix it up some way?'  
'No. I got in wrong.' He talked in the same flat voice. 'There ain't anything to do. After a while I'll make up my mind to go out.'<sup>6</sup>

The lesson Nick is initiated into in 'The Killers' is, quite simply, the inadequacy of the world as an arena of moral, existential possibilities. All one can do is live with oneself with restrained stoic dignity; the world as a harbour of phenomenal possibilities is morally irrelevant almost (even *To Have and Have Not* rings hollow in the context of the early work) and this vision is the powerful heart of the story. The moral arena in Hemingway's work is always the enclosed, self sufficient 'clean, well lighted place'. The furies and ultimacies are always confined within the café, the metonymous consciousness, the boxing and the bull ring.

In Carver's case the epistemic implications of his equally performative, (closer in spirit to Carver's postmodern method than Carlos Williams's 'imitation

of nature' is Chenetier's reading of his 'imitative exploration of the...gap...at the heart of experience'7) even delinquently ritualized, methodology are different to the point of opposition. For Carver the textual re-structuring of the encoded world is not a dynamic of internalization, of re-adequation according to Ideal, rigidly stoic principles of moral/physical craftsmanship, though this contrast is not to imply that Carver's protagonists do not try to make their own adequations since their trying is what ironically links the two writers' methodologies at a stylistic level. The point is that they lack the *capacity* to make an adequation such as Nick does in 'Big Two-Hearted River'. Hemingway's aesthetic is founded on a conception of knowledge as an unstated resource, and this knowledge, mediated by a dignity of form, is the index to feeling in the best stories. In the same way, the sometimes poignant, sometimes terrible rather than strictly dignified epistemic absences in Carver's work are an index to feeling. Structural method, then, for both writers mediates an index to epistemic and ontological as well as existential correlatives. In fact the existential indices are inseparable from these more fundamental indices; when comparing the capacities for feeling, for existential signification in Hemingway and Carver's works, the true area of inquiry is not the psychological but the epistemological. It is a question of epistemic and ontological, *structural* rather than existential, capacities.

It is vital then to an understanding of the relationship between Hemingway and Carver to appreciate not only that there is a significant slippage between their ostensibly similar methodologies, but also to understand the nature of the forces behind this dislocation since the slippage is not incidental to the two writers but is in some ways paradigmatic for the problematic nature of the whole of postmodernism's assimilation of Modernism. Very simply, what separates Hemingway's world from Carver's is not differing capacities for experience and feeling, but rather differing capacities for articulation and hence Being.<sup>8</sup> Hemingway's silences can be articulated, and sometimes are (embarrassingly by Macomber and Robert Jordan); Carver's cannot. Adam Mars-Jones has written of 'The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off': 'If three things can kill your

father off, why not three thousand, or three million?'<sup>9</sup> and though intended as a criticism it highlights an important aspect of Carver's aesthetic, namely the essential indeterminacy undermining the *necessarily* randomly grasped at possibilities for explanation in a world that *has* to be 'artificially' reconciled to the contingent self. Carver's silence, then, is not withheld knowledge, is not a determinate verbal immanence behind the text; it is true absence, it is reflexively *aphasic*, and it is this distinction that lies at the core of Carver's identity as an American writer in the vernacular realist tradition in a postmodern age.

As suggested above, this distinction can be seen on a stylistic as well as thematic level. Just as a thematic homogeneity (the common use of an initiation experience) can be 'split' to reveal an underlying epistemic heterogeneity, so the similarities in style can be shown to mask epistemic oppositions.

Both Hemingway's and Carver's fictions are performative (and implicitly reflexive) in that the narrative mode is not 'transparent' but mannered, so that the way of telling ultimately *is* what is told. The relevance of Carlos Williams' aesthetic of 'performance' to Hemingway's fiction has already been noted, and in Carver's case Chenetier comments: 'Discussing Carver's stories one cannot *know* "what we talk about when we talk about them" without considering the rhetorical model governing the manner in which, time after time, Carver performs them.'<sup>10</sup> But epistemic oppositions emerge when attention shifts from the fact of typological similarities in performance to the very different aesthetic ends towards which the similar stylistic strategies are employed. Chenetier goes on to say of Carver's use of rhetorical performance:

The tactical operations lexically bear on the use of indefinites (the recurrence of 'it', 'what', 'something', and 'thing' is paramount here); a permanent recycling of words from one sentence to the next that generates semantic abrasion and anaphorically carries the reader away from the original and already moderately contextualized occurrence.<sup>11</sup>

This observation is significant in that it develops Chenetier's earlier proposition which could reasonably be applied equally appropriately to either writer, in such a way as to sharply divide them. Basically, Chenetier has gone on

from the stylistic to consider the epistemic foundation on which Carver's style rests and towards which its disintegrative, 'levelling' tactics of dissociation and absence tend. This epistemic destructiveness, where words are recycled in order to leech them of their significances, is in complete contrast to the Cézanne-like re-creative aesthetic of the early Hemingway. Where Carver's recycling leeches and drains away, Hemingway's liturgical repetitions suffuse with a natural symbolism, raise up the linguistic 'host' of the text. To use Naomi Schor's terminology, where Carver 'desacralizes', Hemingway re-sacralizes, though it is the epistemic status of the lex rather than the object which is at stake.

A comparison of Carver's story 'Nobody Said Anything' with 'Big Two-Hearted River' shows up this distinction and its implications quite sharply. To a certain extent, 'Nobody Said Anything' can be usefully read as a Carverian 'commentary' on 'Big Two-Hearted River', in fact: however much slighter Carver's story is, the narrative frameworks of the two stories are very similar in several key respects. In both a fishing trip is undertaken which becomes almost an objective correlative for a deeper, unstated sub-text of encounter and attempted resolution. More interesting than this very general structural parallel however are the several lesser parallels, or correspondences, which Carver seems to subvert, undermining the structural homogeneity by inverting the epistemic authority associated with the ritualistically metonymic narrative mode. Thus, in 'Big Two-Hearted River' we read the following account of Nick's strike and contest against the trout that he loses below his camp:

There was a long tug. Nick struck and the rod came alive and dangerous, bent double, the line tightening, coming out of water, tightening, all in a heavy, dangerous, steady pull...the line tightened into sudden hardness and beyond the logs a huge trout went high out of water...he felt, as he dropped the tip to ease the strain, the moment when the strain was too great...Then it went slack...

...Nick reeled in. He had never seen so big a trout. There was a heaviness, a power not to be held, and then the bulk of him, as he jumped.<sup>12</sup>

In Carver's text on the other hand we read the following account of the boy's catching of his fish (he's in the middle of an erotic daydream and about to start masturbating):

Just as I was going to unzip, I heard a plop in the creek. I looked and saw the tip of my fly rod jiggling.

He wasn't very big and didn't fight much. But I played him as long as I could. He turned on his side and lay in the current down below. I didn't know what he was. He looked strange. I tightened the line and lifted him over the bank into the grass, where he started wiggling. He was a trout. But he was green. I never saw one like him before...It was as if he had been wrapped up in moss a long time and the color had come off all over him...I wondered if he was all right. I looked at him for a time longer, then I put him out of his pain.<sup>13</sup>

There are several key 'subversions' which can be identified here, the principal ones being the binary oppositions between vitality and exhaustion ('the rod came alive and dangerous...a huge trout went high out of water...'/I heard a plop in the creek...he wasn't very big and didn't fight much...'); a natural majesty and a faintly grotesque strangeness and dissociation ('There was a heaviness, a power not to be held...'/He looked strange...I never saw one like him before...'); and finally, throughout the texts, between an Ideal immersion in a highly physical, morally stoic world of hunting and absorption in the debased 'parodic' Ideality of sexual pubescent fantasy.

Basically, what we can see in Carver's story, reading it in the light of 'Big Two-Hearted River', is a desacralizing of the verbal and structural; in short, of the methodological principles apparently common to both texts. The sentence structures and metonymic constructions and even subject matter of the two stories are strikingly similar, and yet any meaningful comparison of the two is forced to proceed along lines not of direct correspondence but of epistemic opposition. The leitmotif, almost, of 'Nobody Said Anything' is masturbation as compulsion; the leitmotif of 'Big Two Hearted River' concentrated decision. The epistemic authority of Hemingway's reconstruction of a world in 'Big Two-Hearted River' rests firmly on Nick's psychological self-control, a correlative of aesthetic authority. In 'Nobody Said Anything' however we read:

I decided I would wait until night before I thought about the woman again...Then I thought I had better stop doing it so much. About a month back, a Saturday when they were all gone, I had picked up the Bible right after and promised and swore I wouldn't do it again. But I got jism on the Bible, and the promising and swearing lasted only a day or two, until I was by myself again.(p.48)

In Hemingway, aesthetic discipline is nothing less than an epistemic value, functioning on every level of the artistic creation, a methodology born out of and reciprocally vindicating an epistemology of re-structuring, re-creating through strictly controlled art. For Carver compulsion 'smears' the figure of textual authority. There is, instead of stoic harmony, a postmodern unease in the face of 'iconic' authority and coherence, echoing the postmodern author's uneasy relationship to the text as an epistemic authority ordering, and even, in Hemingway's case, re-creating experience. The method, the style, pulls towards such a presumption, but the unease is itself a subversion, an undermining of Ideal methodological implications.

The action of 'Nobody Said Anything' culminates in the chase and capture of a stranded fish, correlative for the tensions that run through the text. A measure of reciprocity is reached between the protagonist and the other boy who finds and tells him of the fish, this reciprocity being achieved through their joint hunting of it. Despite quietly longing for friendship however, Carver's narrator and the other boy are soon locked in covert rivalry over the capture of the fish. The epistemic resonances behind these behavioural tensions emerge when the fish is eventually caught. After nearly coming to blows the boys agree to halve it:

I pulled the stick out and laid the fish in the grass beside the kid's bicycle. I took out the knife. A plane taxied down the runway as I measured a line. 'Right here?' I said. The kid nodded. The plane roared down the runway and lifted up right over our heads. I started cutting down into him. I came to his guts and turned him over and stripped everything out...I took the halves and worked them in my hands and I tore him in two.(p.52)

Again, it's interesting to compare a 'parallel' action in 'Big Two-Hearted River':

Nick cleaned them, slitting them from the vent to the tip of the jaw. All the insides and the gills and tongue came out in one piece. They were both males; long, grey-white strips of milt, smooth and clean. All the insides clean and compact, coming out all together...  
...He washed the trout in the stream. When he held them back up in the water they looked like live fish.(p.183)

Several oppositions stand out, of course; Nick's cleaning of his trout bears all the hallmarks of 'Big Two-Hearted River's' inherent code of valorization, of

epistemic authority. The job is 'clean' (a key word) and ritualistic, the style and language ('smooth', 'clean', 'compact,') sacralizing the process until the re-creation of the event has taken on its full epistemic authority, containing chaos and death behind the metonymic bars of the prose just as Nick contains death behind the ritualizing of the fact: 'When he held them back up in the water they looked like live fish'.

In Carver's story the key concepts of cleanness, compactness and smoothness are all overturned; Nick's fish is 'slit', Carver's is 'worked' apart and then torn in two. In the passage from Hemingway the focus is on the fish, a focus that works the natural into the symbolic, the phenomenal into the Ideal that, as a result, harmonizes and heals. As Ficken puts it: 'It was important for Hemingway to "write out" of himself the Nick stories, just as it was important for Nick to camp and fish and cook out his problems'.<sup>14</sup> In Carver's passage the focus is on the boy, a focus interrupted only by an account of the aeroplane taking off over their heads. Instead of an Ideal symbolism providing an index to some epistemic valorization and harmonization, Carver provides a structural microcosm of the destructive tensions inherent in the situation (and in the narrative as a whole) which functions as a very different epistemic code, being less a legitimizing index and more an extension into the epistemic of the desacralizing of the constructed world of the text. In the structural microcosm of the gutting the plane ascends as the knife descends; the transcendental image of escape and release, an ironic correlative of the boy's fantasies, is held in a binary opposition to the violent mutilation of the fish, echoing familial and psychological tensions and functioning as an inversion of religious ritual (alongside the passage concerning the Bible quoted above), specifically the Mass. The significance of this has nothing to do with any religious 'sub-text'; the significance lies in the desacralizing implications regarding ritual as transcendence, implications which denote an epistemology of fragmentation (the metonymic principle of unsacralized action held as it is in opposition to the metaphoric principle of transcendence, the flight of the plane, the transcendence of the downward cut as

it were which Nick achieves in 'Big Two-Hearted River' when he holds the *cleaned* trout up in the water) and deconstruction rather than the Hemingwayesque aesthetic of reconstruction.

To return to the initial contention: what Hemingway sacralizes through style and language Carver desacralizes through a similar style and similar idiom, both using narrative performance as, in Mellard's phrase, 'a mode of reality'. Thus both utilize an aesthetic reductionism to an epistemic end, Hemingway in order to reduce to a basic, irreducible 'nature' which is the reconstructed, Ideal 'nature' of artistic creation, Carver in order to strip down phenomenal oppositions in order to reveal the structural oppositions at the heart of any attempt at reconstruction which subsumes the metonymic, the oppositional, into the metaphoric, into resolution.

Alfred Kazin has written: 'Hemingway's was the perfect reduction, the ultimate logic, of this modernist faith: what was unmistakable would be indestructible', and that this reduction to an inviolate essence of textual authority consists in 'the right ordering of words.'<sup>15</sup> Methodologically this clearly has much in common with the essentials of Carver's own aesthetic:

It's possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things...with immense, even startling power...

...That's all we have, finally, the words, and they had better be the right ones, with the punctuation in the right places so that they can best say what they are meant to say.<sup>16</sup>

But what prevents Carver's texts becoming, like Hemingway's, essentially Modernistic texts, is not method. What subverts the textual authority, the textual and epistemic indestructibility of 'the right ordering of words' in Carver's fiction can perhaps best be summed up by adapting Charles Caramello's comments quoted earlier regarding the 'ghostliness' of the postmodern text. Just as 'the physical book remains as the ghost of a concept that has been destroyed',<sup>17</sup> a formal ghost, so Carver's texts are methodological ghosts of a Modernist aesthetic, the ironic, performing shadows of an earlier narrative authority and inviolability.

Kazin points out that the 'strict Modernist aesthetic' of Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Cummings entailed 'the excision of whatever was "vague", "religious", "shadowy", like Kafka.'<sup>18</sup> For Carver a strict methodology of metonymic progression remains, but very much as an exoskeleton rather than an indestructible, immortal soul; inside the exoskeleton is the 'shadowy', the Kafkaesque, the green trout, exorcised by Edmund Wilson's and Hemingway's textual self-sufficiency, but after Saussure open to possession again by what is truly 'ghostly' in the text - not immanent essence but Derrida's *absent* presence; not Hemingway's silent knowledge, but aphasia.

The framework of the hunt, the all but sacramental ritual, is intact in both 'Big Two-Hearted River' and 'Nobody Said Anything', but Hemingway's framework is the narrative soul itself; Carver's framework, the exoskeleton, the prose cage, is constantly being shaken and buckled from within by the incommunicable, the 'shadowy' absences, the postmodern ghosts of narrative authority. The boy's parents are speechless when the torn fish is presented to them, when they are confronted by a 'semiological' crystallizing of the principles of fragmentation by which they have come to live, and significantly it is precisely this speechlessness, this semiological absence (even the phrase itself doesn't appear in the text) which is chosen as the title of the narrative.

Hemingway wrestled a narrative authority out of indeterminacy, out of the 'shadowy', by making the tight, ritually self-enclosed 'concreteness' of the metonymic text its own metaphoric legitimization. Carver ostensibly continues the same struggle using the same fictional correlatives, but in fact only to acknowledge the desublimated, bastardized nature of metonymic ritual itself in the postmodern context. Carver's 'haunted' fictions are the methodological, structural culmination of the epistemic process charted by Kazin when he writes:

Hemingway's faith in the 'unmistakeable', the linear, was to become an heirloom that could not be passed on...Perhaps the greatest challenge to Hemingway was to come from Faulkner, whose unselfconscious originality of technique...showed narrative not as a triumph *over* experience, but as the struggle of language to find support for the mind in its everlasting struggle with the past...

...Faulkner was another name for a world - for history - that could not be reduced to a style.<sup>19</sup>

So far it has been shown that both thematically and stylistically striking parallels generated by similar methodologies have been less strikingly but more significantly undermined epistemologically. It remains however to take the structural analysis of these methodologies of omission, of structural silences, further and examine Carver's absences not simply as epistemic foils to Hemingway's silences but as epistemic and aesthetic significances in themselves.

Lodge's critical methodology of typological binary oppositions has already been used to provide a loose context within which to interpret and qualify some of the complex relationships between the Modern and the postmodern that have been posited in this study. Clearly however such an approach would be meaningless unless the principle of binary opposition at a typological level significantly informed the fictions of both writers in a discrete textual as well as comparative sense. As noted above, the epistemological heterogeneity is only clearly apprehended when the 'rock' of method is split, revealing in Hemingway's case an Idealist internalization and aesthetic reconstruction of objective reality and in Carver's a 'ghostly' absence in the place of stable referentiality and epistemic authority. Thus 'The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off' has a deaf mute as its undeciphering, indecipherable cipher, and 'Nobody Said Anything' ends with a loss of stable denotation, the halved fish becoming referentially reduced to the denotation 'what was there': 'What was there looked silver under the porch light. What was there filled the creel'(p.54).

To understand fully the significances of Carver's method then these epistemic significations need to be seen in a closer analytical light than that of comparison, and it is certainly possible to focus the structural analysis directly onto Carver's discrete texts. The oppositions between knowledge and aphasia, the Modern and the postmodern, Idealism and scepticism, metaphor and metonymy are not just typological categories which can be applied to a comparative analysis of Carver's work; they are integral to it. Though Hemingway represents a Modernist foil to Carver as a postmodern, the

relationship is, not at all straightforward. To refer back to McCaffery's metaphor, Carver has neither simply reacted against nor simply returned to the ontology of the narrative bequeathed to American vernacular realism by Stein's, Anderson's and, most influentially, the 'Dead Father' Hemingway's, Modernism; rather he has 'ritually eaten and digested it'. Not surprisingly then, a structural analysis of Carver's work in relation to the epistemologically turbulent American realism of the Twentieth Century cannot reasonably stop at a generalized polarization between two epistemic tendencies. In fact the tensions generated by those unstable polarities penetrate the character both of Carver's individual texts and his body of work as a dynamic whole, not simply the nature of his aesthetic relationship as postmodern to Hemingway's Modernism, necessarily the main focus of attention so far.

Comparisons with the Modernist epistemological 're-builder' Hemingway show, of course, what is lost to Carver as a postmodern, but if Handke's claim that 'every step, every glance, every gesture...should be aware of itself as a possible threshold and thus recreate what has been lost' is to be seriously associated with Carver's own textual dynamics, then a critical preoccupation with the deprivations of the 'postmodern turn' is in itself not enough. If what is to be 'recreated' is the possibility of the 'shock of connection', scepticism alone cannot be isolated as the epistemic initiator of Carver's absences, only a feature of the epistemic/aesthetic terrain in which they find themselves; the silences between meaning and absurdity, coherence and aphasia, are rarely, if ever, capitulations in the face of overwhelming, 'ultimate' epistemic odds. They are themselves explorations, however tenuous, uncertain and even unrecognized, moving beyond the 'well-lighted places' of the Ideal. Just as Hemingway's omissions are the structural 'nerve-centres' of his fictions, so Carver's absences are at the heart of this elusive, aphasic, even delinquent exploratory approach to a tentative re-adequation.

In the story 'Viewfinder', for example, we see aphasic absence - the loss of a cohering, 'metaphoric' validation of identity and being (figured as the narrator's loss of his family) - providing the space, as it were, for an intensely metonymic, 'delinquent' attempt at re-connection which may not be adequate ("Show me," I said. "Show me how much. Take more pictures of me and my house."/"It won't work," the man said. "They're not coming back."(pp.193-4)) but is certainly *adequative* in its impulse. The narrator begins to take an interest in having photographs of himself and his house taken after seeing himself in one of the photographer's earlier snaps of the property:

There was a little rectangle of lawn, the driveway, the carport, front steps, bay window, and the window I'd been watching from in the kitchen.

So why would I want a photograph of this tragedy?

I looked a little closer and saw my head, *my head*, in there inside the kitchen window.

It made me think, seeing myself like that. I can tell you, it makes a man think.(p.192)

The effect that seeing himself in the photograph has on him is perhaps best described as one of reflexive dis-location - it is a sudden indication that 'existence doesn't take place inside the skin', or at least not *only* inside the skin. It takes place within a semiological matrix, inside *codes* of being, (Bloom's 'language structures surrounding them') as Carver hints at in abruptly and otherwise arbitrarily connecting the narrator's dislocation from his familiar securities of being (his family) and the spatial/temporal dis-location occasioned by the photograph:

I picked up the picture.

'I was in the kitchen,' I said. 'Usually I'm in the back.'

'Happens all the time,' he said. 'So they just up and left you, right?'(p.193)

That the story is primarily concerned with questions of epistemic/semiological dissociation is clear enough, then, but what liberates the text from a simple scepticism, a simple exploitation of postmodern truisms, is the way in which this dislocation is responded to:

I went inside and got a chair. I put it up under the carport. But it didn't reach. So I got a crate and put the crate on top of the chair.

It was okay up there on the roof.  
 I stood up and looked around. I waved, and the man with no hands waved back with his hooks.  
 It was then I saw them, the rocks. It was like a little rock nest on the screen over the chimney hole. You know kids. You know how they lob them up, thinking to sink one down your chimney.  
 'Ready?' I called, and I got a rock, and I waited until he had me in his viewfinder.  
 'Okay!' he called.  
 I laid back my arm and I hollered, 'Now!' I threw that son of a bitch as far as I could throw it.  
 'I don't know,' I heard him shout. 'I don't do motion shots.'  
 'Again!' I screamed, and took up another rock.(p.194)

There is more than bleak humour in this ending, though that is important: the most significant dynamic is the 'exploding' of the signifier/signified, sign/subject opposition which the photograph foregrounds. The narrator is now *performing* (reflexively 'textualizing') his alienation and dissociation, his exile from the security of being represented by the house - he is no longer snapped unaware and *in* the house, he is now precariously *on* it, and no longer at the mercy of the camera, the viewfinder, the limiting framer and 'freezer' of existence, but now dictating to it, violating its containments: "I don't know...I don't do motion shots."

On a thematic/existential level there is then an affirmation of the eccentric (even 'ex-centric') act as a desperate re-assertion of an imperilled identity, an imperilled self. But more interestingly perhaps there is also a deeper, typologically 'in excess' dimension to this dynamic. The viewfinder is not just a figure for an existential 'freezing' of life, it is also a reflexively significant figure for a *metaphorical* framing of the 'language of experience', to paraphrase Barthele: thus the 'little rectangle of lawn, the driveway, the carport, front steps, bay window' become 'this tragedy', just as in more orthodox circumstances such a photograph functions as an icon of security, of possession, of extended identity. The narrator cannot in his dissociation fit into such a metaphorical frame - he can only be dis-placed in(to) one; hence the 'aphasic', bizarrely contingent, 'delinquent' nature of the narrative. He can however *explode* the metaphor/metonymy opposition by deconstructing it on its own terms - in breaking free of the viewfinder's containments he breaks free ('in excess') of the

typologically grounded interpretive moment itself. Instead of psychological or even figural *placement* we find an anarchic *performance* of *displacement* (the hurling of the rocks), a kinetic typological restlessness.

What such 'delinquency' explores, then, is not static codes of being in any mythopoeic, valorizing or sacralizing sense. The silences beneath the performance are not 'clean, well-lighted places' of the soul. For Carver the aphasic is implicated always in struggle, in an interfacial rather than binary engagement with the typological. The stakes are not Hemingway's private, stoically valorized disciplines of being, but are simply the possibilities for a mimesis of even the most minimally coherent, knowable 'reality'; a reality imaged through the aphasic text struggling, working to communicate in and necessarily *through* the limited, eccentric, even at times pathological idioms methodologically traceable from Abish's post-Holocaust Germany to Carver's post-social America.

This aphasic, epistemic minimalism permeates Carver's characters to the core, particularly in the earlier stories. Thus in 'Bicycles, Muscles, Cigaretts' we find Evan Hamilton 'struck by the range of his son's personal life' just on walking some two blocks from his own home(p.144). For such characters the line between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the secure and the dissociative, is a perilously thin one, and the 'consequence' of crossing it often nothing less than a radical and threatening dissolving of 'familiar' structures of control and an abandonment to a damaging contingency. Evan Hamilton, introduced to us as a man in the very process of exerting more control over his life (giving up smoking), finds himself pitched almost helplessly into a violent losing of control, being provoked into a short, brutal fight with the father of one of his son's friends over a missing bicycle. Throughout the story there is a superbly crafted tension rooted in the interwoven tropes of limitation, unfamiliarity, dis-location and finally anarchically violent contingency. Moreover, through Hamilton's post-fight memory of his own father in just such a situation Carver locates the significances

of these tropes in a crisis of identity, in the limitations and contingencies (of course cancer is one such contingency) of self-hood, of being:

He had once seen his father - a pale, slow-talking man with slumped shoulders - in something like this. It was a bad one, and both men had been hurt. It had happened in a café. The other man was a farmhand. Hamilton had loved his father and could recall many things about him. But now he recalled his father's one fistfight as if it were all there was to the man.(p.149)

The almost absurd limitations depicted in this story (hardly knowing one's own immediate neighbourhood, getting drawn into a pointless and humiliating fistfight) culminating in this limiting of memory, the very index to being and knowing, represent far more than just arbitrary dramatics, however contingent they may be, then. Ultimately, they seem to delineate the disturbing lines of an aphasic, dissociated condition of being, a condition of lack, of loss:

The boy rolled onto his side and watched his father walk to the door and watched him put his hand to the switch. And then the boy said, 'Dad? You'll think I'm pretty crazy, but I wish I'd known you when you were little. I mean, about as old as I am right now. I don't know how to say it, but I'm lonesome about it. It's like - it's like I miss you already if I think about it now. That's pretty crazy, isn't it? Anyway, please leave the door open.'

Hamilton left the door open, and then he thought better of it and closed it halfway.(p.151)

The semiological/epistemic roots of these typically 'Carverian' losses and limitations are explored further of course in many of his other narratives. In the fiction 'Signals' for instance Carver depicts a couple at the very edge of an obviously acrimonious separation almost perversely celebrating the wife's birthday at an exclusive (the unfamiliar again, and here, through the 'opacity' of the French menu, perfectly placed for semiological resonances) restaurant. The situation is used to create a multi-layered 'anti-dynamic' of disintegration, subtly and powerfully linking semiological, social and psychological tensions and disruptions.

The evening begins placidly enough, then the couple, Wayne and Caroline, study the menu:

In a while, he said, 'Well, what are you going to have?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'I haven't decided. What are you going to have?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'I haven't decided, either.'

'What about one of these French dishes, Wayne? Or else this? Over here on this side.' She placed her finger in instruction, and then she narrowed her eyes at him as he located the language, pursed his lips, frowned and shook his head.

'I don't know,' he said. 'I'd kind of like to know what I'm getting. I just don't really know.'

The waiter returned with a card and a pencil and said something Wayne couldn't quite catch.

'We haven't decided yet,' Wayne said. He shook his head as the waiter continued to stand by the table. 'I'll signal you when we're ready...

...'We could have had a better table,' Wayne said. 'Instead of right here in the center where everyone can walk by and watch you eat. We could have had a table against the wall. Or over there, by the fountain.'

'I think I'll have the beef Tournedos,' Caroline said.

She kept looking at her menu. He tapped out a cigaret, lighted it, and then glanced around at the other diners. Caroline still stared at her menu.

'Well, for God's sake, if that's what you're going to have, close your menu so he can take our order.' Wayne raised his arm for the waiter, who lingered near the back talking with another waiter.

'Nothing else to do but gas around with the other waiters,' Wayne said.(p.160-1)

It is not difficult to locate the sources of the progressive deterioration in Wayne's mood. The first of many negative gestures, or signals, occurs when he is confronted with the French menu and has to 'locate' the language. This is followed by his obvious discomfort at the waiter's first comment which 'he couldn't quite catch'. It is these semiological disruptions or, staying with Carver's own vocabulary regarding the menu, dis-locations, that trigger his dis-ease, his dissociation and consequent aggressive insecurity ('We could have had a table against the wall'). What follows this 'crossing of the line' to recall the earlier reading of 'Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarets', is another contingently 'anarchical' spiral into conflict, though this time subsumed into a form of semiological warfare involving both the waiters and the couple themselves:

'And we'll have that right away. Before the salad or the relish plate,' Wayne said.

'Oh, bring the relish *tray*, anyway,' Caroline said. 'Please.'

'Yes, madam,' the waiter said.

'They're a slippery bunch,' Wayne said...

...'Let's talk about something pleasant,' Caroline said.

'All right, sure,' Wayne said...

...They clinked glasses.

'I like champagne,' Caroline said.

'I like champagne,' Wayne said.

'We could have had a bottle of Lancer's,' Caroline said.

'Well, why didn't you say something, if that's what you wanted?' Wayne said.

'I don't know,' Caroline said, 'I just didn't think about it. This is fine, though.'

'I don't know too much about champagnes. I don't mind admitting I'm not much of a...connoisseur. I don't mind admitting I'm just a lowbrow.' He laughed and tried to catch her eye, but she was busy selecting an olive from the relish dish. 'Not like the group you've been keeping company with lately. But if you wanted Lancer's,' he went on, 'you should have ordered Lancer's.'

'Oh, shut up!' she said. 'Can't you talk about something else?' She looked up at him then and he had to look away.(pp.161-2)

When Wayne says of the waiters 'They're a slippery bunch' Carver is at least partially, and wittily, referring to the real culprits regarding his character's dissociation - the opacity of words, *signals*, that confuse and divide at least as readily as they reveal:

They looked steadily at each other as they drank. 'We ought to do this more often,' he said.

She nodded.

'It's good to get out now and then. I'll make more of an effort, if you want me to.'

She reached for the celery. 'That's up to you.'

'That's not true! It's not me who's...who's...'

'Who's what?' she said.

'I don't care what you do,' he said, dropping his eyes.

'Is that true?'

'I don't know why I said that,' he said.(pp.162-3)

This story then is far more than the contemporary American comedy of manners it might at first seem: on close examination it seems much more a broadly 'comic' exploration into postmodern problematics of communication and signification itself.<sup>20</sup> For Carver the postmodern aporia underlying all the limitations, losses, dissociations and desperate aggression is, these three stories (and many others) indicate, like language itself, irreducibly *social*. The 'site' of language is in some senses always an unfamiliar restaurant (or neighbourhood, or even home once 'invaded' by the radically unfamiliar as in 'Viewfinder') with incomprehensible staff, untranslated menu and facile, unknowable *maitre d'*; certainly the site of language (Butor's 'fundamental narrative', Barthelme's 'language of experience') in crisis, language at the point of aphasic breakdown, of the postmodern opacity the story closes with:

'Dear Lady,' Aldo said. 'I have something for you. One moment, please.' He reached to a vase on a table near the door and swung gracefully back with a long-stemmed rose.

'For you, dear lady,' Aldo said. 'But caution, please. The thorns. A very lovely lady,' he said to Wayne and smiled at him and turned to welcome another couple.

Caroline stood there.

'Let's get out of here,' Wayne said.

'You can see how he could be friends with Lana Turner,' Caroline said. She held the rose and turned it between her fingers.

'Good night!' she called out to Aldo's back. But Aldo was occupied selecting another rose.

'I don't think he ever knew her,' Wayne said.(p.165)

The structural/epistemic silence left in the wake of such a dissociative fracturing of communication has of course been comprehensively attended to by contemporary criticism, but almost exclusively in the context of the irrealist fracturing found in textual modes from science fiction to metafiction. Lance Olson for instance typically applies a Derridean reading of fracturing, 'in excess' absence to texts of 'fantastic discourse', claiming that:

To write is to produce gaps that must be supplemented...[writing] becomes an absence which must be filled...texts of fantastic discourse not only believe in absent centre; they revel in its possibilities.<sup>21</sup>

But the potentialities of Olsen's 'revelling in the possibilities of the absent centre', are, as has already been noted, not the exclusive preserve of meta- or fantastic fiction. Again, a distinction can be drawn between the *metaphorically* realized potencies released by an embracing of the liberating/threatening absent centre and the less exuberant but no less resonant 'symbolic energy' realized in the *metonymic* reflex to the textual fracture, or fissure. Indeed, Roland Barthes has described the potencies of the postmodern, scriptible text which 'practices the infinite deferment of the signified' using a clearly metonymic (though not of course referential) rhetoric:

[T]he generation of the perpetual signifier...in the field of the text...is realized not according to an organic progress of maturation or a hermeneutic course of deepening investigation, but, rather, according to a serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations. The logic regulating the Text is not comprehensive (define 'what the work means') but metonymic; the activity of associations, contiguities, carryings-over coincides with a liberation of symbolic energy.<sup>22</sup>

The resonances of Carver's fictions seem almost perfectly described as 'the activity of associations, contiguities, carryings-over' consonant with 'a liberation of symbolic energy', a liberation echoed more laconically by Carver's 'hitting all the right notes'.<sup>23</sup> It is almost invariably through 'a serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations', that Carver's metonymic texts achieve an adequate potential, how the limited, always signifying rather than 'meaning' postmodern texts achieve 'symbolic energy', and these 'serial movements and variations' are equally evidently generated by 'the infinite deferment of the signified', by the frisson of potentiality which haunts the textual absence. This formulation of Barthes' then provides a highly suggestive rhetoric with which to move on from the irrealist bias of so many critical readings of absence and towards the metonymic tensions and elisions characterizing Carver's 'realistic' textual problematics of postmodern adequation.

'Are You A Doctor?' is, for instance, a narrative masterfully structured around 'a serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations' and 'infinite deferment of the signified'. With typical irony however, Carver, as with 'The Student's Wife', opens the narrative on a deceptive note of certainty: 'In slippers, pajamas, and robe, he hurried out of the study when the telephone began to ring. Since it was past ten, the call would be his wife' (p.33). As so often in Carver's stories, such security is simply a hinge for the jaws of dissociation:

'Hello, dear,' he said. 'Hello,' he said again.  
'Who is this?' a woman asked.  
'Well, who is *this*?' he said. 'What number do you want?'  
'Just a minute,' the woman said. 'It's 273-8063.'  
'That's my number,' he said. 'How did you get it?'  
'I don't know. It was written down on a piece of paper when I got in from work,' the woman said.  
'Who wrote it down?'  
'I don't know,' the woman said. 'The sitter, I guess. It must be her.'  
'Well, I don't know how she got it,' he said, 'but it's my telephone number, and it's unlisted. I'd appreciate it if you'd just toss it away. Hello? Did you hear me?'(p.33)

At once, then, we find ourselves plunged, along with the protagonist, into dislocation. And the dislocation is dependent on one basic trope, namely

deferment: deferment of identity (regarding both characters), of information (the origin of the note) and immeasurably strengthening the trope the conversation itself is structured around pregnant pauses, an almost comic reluctance on the part of both speakers to divulge information, an insistent patterning of questions undercut by a near refrain of 'I don't know'.

These initial deferments and evasions are eventually overcome, though not without a struggle:

'And your second name, Arnold? What's your second name?'  
'I really must hang up,' he said.  
'Arnold, for goodness sake, I'm Clara Holt. Now *your* name is Mr. Arnold what?'  
'Arnold Breit,' he said and then quickly added, 'Clara Holt. That's nice. But I really think I should hang up now, Miss Holt. I'm expecting a call.'(p.34)

These initial, almost preparatory, deferments give way only to usher in a far more complex 'serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations' however. The voice on the end of Arnold's line does not lose its mystery in revealing the name Clara Holt; instead this initial uncovering reveals a deepening of ambiguity, a more radical deferment which suddenly moves ('carries over') Arnold Breit from the safe limitations of a telephone call to the unsettling brink of unknowable and hence all but limitless potentialities:

'Could we meet somewhere, Arnold? You see, I haven't told you everything. There's something else,' the woman said.  
'What do you mean?' he said. 'What is this exactly? Hello?'  
She had hung up.  
When he was preparing for bed, his wife called, somewhat intoxicated, he could tell, and they chatted for a while, but he said nothing about the other call. Later, as he was turning the covers down, the telephone rang again.  
He picked up the receiver. 'Hello. Arnold Breit speaking.'  
'Arnold, I'm sorry we got cut off. As I was saying, I think it's important we meet.'(p.35)

From here on Carver ingeniously inverts the use of deferment in the story: what now becomes dislocating and disruptive, 'in excess' of both Arnold's (and the narrative's metonymic, typologically partial) 'securities' is the sudden near-intimacy initiated by Clara Holt:

The next afternoon as he put the key into the lock, he could hear the telephone ringing. He dropped his briefcase and, still in hat,

coat and gloves, hurried over to the table and picked up the receiver.

'Arnold, I'm sorry to bother you again,' the woman said. 'But you must come to my house tonight around nine or nine-thirty. Can you do that for me, Arnold?'

His heart moved when he heard her use his name.(p.35)

When they finally meet it becomes clear that this confusion or elision of deferment and intimacy is the structural epicentre of the story. Arnold's kissing her is a scene shot through with a disturbing detachment, and nothing is resolved in their subsequent awkward and once more evasive conversation. There seems little significance, then, to this briefest of encounters, but with the closing sentence however Carver throws this understated account of suburban dis-ease open into implications which abruptly shift the text's resonances onto a level of epistemic, even ontological dynamics and problematics:

'Strange,' he said as he started down the stairs. He took a long breath when he reached the sidewalk and paused a moment to look back at the building. But he was unable to determine which balcony was hers...

...When he reached home, the telephone was ringing. He stood very quietly in the middle of the room, holding the key between his fingers until the ringing stopped. Then, tenderly, he put a hand against his chest and felt, through the layers of clothes, his beating heart. After a time he made his way into the bedroom.

Almost immediately the telephone came alive again, and this time he answered it. 'Arnold. Arnold Breit speaking,' he said.

'Arnold? My, aren't we formal tonight!' his wife said, her voice strong, teasing. 'I've been calling since nine. Out living it up, Arnold?'

He remained silent and considered her voice.

'Are you there, Arnold?' she said. 'You don't sound like yourself.'(p.39)

The structural means of releasing the story's 'symbolic energy' then certainly seems to correlate to Barthes' delineation of the potentially adequate postmodern text. In the first place the pervasive deferment is, as in Barthes' 'model', metonymic: the lives of Arnold and Clara Holt *overlap* as a result of a fluke phone call, there is no synthetic dynamic of signification in this, only a *contingent* connection which forms the basis of a wider 'serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations'; as for Barthes' scriptible text, then, the 'logic regulating' the certainly scriptible text of their relationship (it is certainly impossible to definitively say 'what it means', as would at least be invited by an orthodox realism) 'is not comprehensive...but metonymic'. And a correlate of

this as regards the 'parent' text of the narrative proper is that its silences, its absences, are authentically aphasic, their resonances generated by a constantly withheld communicative 'consummation', both within the communicative matrix of the narrative and within the reader-text relationship, the 'symbolic energy' thus being an energy of frustrated, *delinquent* expectation. In epistemologically paring the text down to deferment rather than structuring it towards resolution he leaves the metonymic frame empty of stable, secure epistemic signifieds but by the same token wholly open to a resonant, highly charged 'threshold' awareness and even expectation of, new competing potentialities. This 'symbolic energy' is not to be characterized as metaphysical however. The delinquent, anarchic potentiality for adequation is horizontal and typological, never vertical, never appealing to a transcending of textuality itself.

Marc Chenetier, in his essay on Carver 'Living On/Off the Reserve', though he relies on the phenomenalist Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading* rather than Derridean strategies for the basis of his critical analysis of Carver's absences, sets out several lines of argument that 'translate' very usefully into a 'horizontal' vocabulary. Writing of the uses of absence in Carver's texts he comes to the following formulation:

The innumerable unanswered questions of his stories do not so much embody an interrogation of the future as they reveal the mysteries of an implicit past...

...Going unanswered, such questions linger in the mind during and after the reading of the texts, inciting one to look among the blanks and negations for answers feeding on transcended literary meaning.<sup>24</sup>

Chenetier's vertical 'metaphysic' of these 'blanks and negations' is defined, following Iser, as 'negativity':

Eerily echoing Carver's definition of fiction, Wolfgang Iser writes: 'Fiction may be defined as a form of communication since it brings into the world something which is not already there'. And he adds: 'That which literature brings into the world can only reveal itself as negativity'. It is within the context of negativity that Carver's fictions may perhaps be assessed in the most satisfactory manner.(p.180)

What makes Iser's formulation, despite its phenomenalist 'metaphysic', valuable for a reading of Carver is his more precise delineating of this negativity, this 'hollow that undermines from within all that is said', as 'twofold':

Meaning thus emerges as the reverse side of what the text has depicted. The world of the text appears in a state of alienation, and this alienation effect indicates that meaning is potentially there, awaiting redemption from its potentiality. In consequence of this, the unwritten text is constituted by a dialectic mutation of the written...Meaning coincides with the emergence of the reverse side of the represented world...We see the twofold structure of negativity - as the cause of the deformation it is also the potential remedy, and is thus the structural basis for communication.<sup>25</sup>

For Barthes, the 'meaning' immanent or chimerically unattainable (according to the epistemic point of view) in the the text's absences remains always an aesthetic potentiality. For Iser and for Carver (bearing in mind the vertical/horizontal 'split') however, meaning, though it is likewise 'potentially there', is not stable as *potentiality*; the dialectical dynamics of the text as coherer, as *Leserappell*, (in new realist practice as typologically choreographed performance), or as 'threshold', are such that it is constantly under a structural pressure to metamorphose into adequation, into the *kinetics* of connection. For Carver the epistemic potential of the absent heart of the text is, as Iser says, always 'awaiting redemption from its potentiality'. In Barthes' model of the text the 'symbolic energy' is generated by a 'teasing', a playful but nevertheless complacent, *stable* withholding. In Iser's model the 'symbolic energy' is generated by epistemic *pressure* ('dialectic mutation', 'deformation') because for him (and more particularly for Carver) the withholding is less a game, more a crisis to be endured: thus the nervy, ambiguous 'affirmation' concluding 'Fat', Ann Weiss's desperate expectancy in 'The Bath' and more crudely but still effectively the unnamed mother's repressed terror at the close of 'Why, Honey?'

In Carver's fiction this enduring, this 'awaiting', can be identified not only at the level of the discrete text, but in the context of his work as a whole since it forms a subtly evolving (though far from systematic) pattern which can be usefully traced along the lines of the title stories of his first three major collections. In the first such story, 'Will You Please Be Quiet, Please' the

dynamic of the narrative is the outworking of a situation where an uncommunicated though 'haunting' fact (a wife's adultery) finally surfaces. The story is thus generated by an 'absent presence' (the initially unstated fact of the adultery) and is then played out on a razor's edge of Iserian potentiality where the husband, Ralph, after the confession, wanders through an urban maze of suddenly emptied signifiers, emptied texts, 'awaiting redemption from this potentiality', this suspension of his life between sudden meaninglessness and the need for a new means of re-connection, of adequation:

[A] dark cutout of a man leaned over the jukebox in the corner, his hands splayed on each side of the glass. That man is going to play something, Ralph thought, as if making a momentous discovery...

...He kept swallowing, looked up as a car of yelling teenagers went by and gave him a long blast on their musical horn. Yes, there was a great evil pushing at the world, he thought, and it only needed a little slipway, a little opening...

...A bell over the door tinkled. Ralph almost wept from the sound of it.(pp.174-5)

This collage of empty, dissociated and dissociating signs is steadily built up through the narrative, each set of signs either explicitly or implicitly evoking a desperate 'redemption of potentiality' from Ralph as every sign touched by his dislocated emotions is charged with half comic tormented ('mutation', 'deformation') significances. The story ends with Ralph returning home, still unwilling to face his wife who has obviously now for Ralph become the ultimate signifier of dissociation (long before the adultery she appears to Ralph as awaiting a threatening 'redemption from potentiality': while on honeymoon he watches her on the balcony of their hotel and is struck by her sensuality, 'the whole incident [putting] Ralph in mind of something from a film, an intensely dramatic moment into which Marian could be fitted and he could not'(p.167)). As a result he is unable to cross the threshold from his self-deluding position before the confession when he 'felt, without really thinking about it, that he and Marian understood each other perfectly - as well at least as any two people might'(p.167), to a less innocent but finally unavoidable position where the 'redemption of possibilities' is free to occur, whatever the upheaval the recognition of the essentially indeterminate nature of such a life (again,

'fundamental narrative') may bring. This threshold can be crossed only when Ralph sees the 'twofold structure of negativity' which is 'the structural basis for communication'. Only when, that is, Ralph submits to the ambiguities and indeterminacies of silence (absence), the 'negation' of verbal, securely encoded understanding; it is this 'letting go' that figures the narrative's potential re-connection and hence dynamic of adequation, the 'structural basis for communication' it tentatively establishes:

He tensed at her fingers, and then he let go a little. It was easier to let go a little. Her hand moved over his hip and over his stomach and she was pressing her body over his now and moving over him and back and forth over him. He held himself, he later considered, as long as he could. And then he turned to her. He turned and turned in what might have been a stupendous sleep, and he was still turning, marveling at the impossible changes he felt moving over him.(p.182)

Though not many of Carver's stories can be read quite so easily in terms of Iser's vocabulary, many illustrate certain of the basic insights underlying it. In one sense the real distinction of 'Will You Please Be Quiet, Please' amongst the collection's other stories is its carrying through of the Iserian dialectic to its actual hope of re-connection, over the 'threshold' to the actual beginnings of 'a structural basis for communication'. Certainly many of Carver's fictions follow the broad lines of the Iserian dialectic without crossing the threshold, in fact all the stories so far discussed (though 'Bicycles, Muscles, Cigaretts' ends with the suggestive *half*-closure of the threshold of Hamilton's son's bedroom door, of course).

This is also true of the second title story, 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Love', though there is a significant deepening of implication and significance in the failure. Here again a host of 'absent presences' can be seen to underlie the discursive matrix regarding 'love' that forms the structure of the story; every one of the four characters has gone through previous marriages, and unstated 'potentialities' constantly threaten the semiological 'surface tension' of their drunken amiability:

Mel fastened his eyes on Laura. He said, 'Laura, if I didn't have Terri and if I didn't love her so much, and if Nick wasn't my

best friend, I'd fall in love with you. I'd carry you off, honey,' he said.(p.278-9)

The primary 'absent presence' however is of course 'love' itself. As an indefinable, multivalent state this *necessary* absence subsumes all the other fragmentary, contingent absences discursively represented by the four characters. Mel, the main speaker in the story, uses the story of an old couple injured together in a car crash in an attempt to finally 'fix' the concept of love, and this attempt is the rhetorical, reflexive 'heart' of the story, the point where the 'doubleness' of the negativity that is the true 'subject' of the narrative is first exposed:

Mel said, 'I was going to tell you about something. I mean, I was going to prove a point. You see, this happened a few months ago, but it's still going on right now, and it ought to make us feel ashamed when we talk like we know what we're talking about when we talk about love.'(p.275)

Much is made of the fact that the old couple cannot communicate, cannot even make eye contact, an ironic counterpoint to the highly verbal, freely discursive but by the same token self-deconstructive, 'infinitely deferring' series of semiological 'disconnections, overlappings, variations' characterizing the conversation around the table. The non-verbal, discourse-deprived situation therefore becomes a '*structural* basis for communication' in that the 'absent presence' of love is communicated through that very condition of deprivation, that negativity. The main narrative however closes with a return to the reverse side of this sub-narrative's 'structural basis'; the final scene is of a completely 'fluid' deprivation, offering figures not of any structural dynamic, only of spillage, waste, and finally a stasis where the talk, the discourse, the 'human noise' of the 'symposium' has been pared away to the most minimal of all human noises, the heartbeat:

Mel turned his glass over. He spilled it out on the table.

'Gin's gone,' Mel said.

Terri said, 'Now what?'

I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone's heart. I could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark.(p.280-1)

In a sense then 'Will You Please Be Quiet, Please' might seem something of an anomaly in the context of Carver's early work, simply because the threshold is not only *approached* as Ralph stumbles through the desacralized signs surrounding him (a semiological correlate to Mel's discursive stumbling through the desacralized signifiers of love) but is actually crossed. Ralph holds himself in the stasis that closes the latter story for as long as he is able, but at last turns and finds himself 'marveling at the impossible changes he felt moving over him'. Certainly, as William Stull comments, 'To set this passage against the closing paragraph of the later title story...is to juxtapose heaven and hell'.<sup>26</sup> In the context of Carver's work as a whole however, this 'redemption' can be seen less as an anomaly and more a preview of the development of Carver's art.

This thesis began by identifying the need for and the attempts made at establishing a new, postmodern mimesis in American fiction. So far a rhetoric for delineating the broad structural principles that seem to lie behind the new realist engagement with postmodern adequation has been at least partially proposed, but the actual nature of this attempted adequation itself as it is manifested in Carver's fiction has yet to be explored. In fact, though the disjunctions which reverberate through the texts can be identified with phenomenalist disjunctions between text and reader (and indeed this dimension is not wholly separable), the semiological and epistemic dislocations typical of Carver's postmodern terrain should, finally, be traced within the typological dynamics of the textual matrix itself. Carver's fictions are interfaces *within* themselves, their own typological and rhetorical dynamics are the postmodern discourse they reflexively address, and, arguably, adequately transform.

When adequation is felt for in his texts then, it is hardly surprising that Carver's engagements with 'negativity' are characteristically figured 'socially', since the textuality of 'disconnections, overlappings, variations' is inescapably

social in its contiguity, its metonymy, and moreover this is why its aphasia is wounding, not simply an indulgence.

When types of existential/semiological stasis occur in fact, they are invariably precipitated by a figuring of a breakdown in the meticulously charted semiology or 'serial movement' of *social/domestic* life. The characters have not wandered in from *Waiting for Godot*, as Chenetier indicates at the end of his (otherwise very valuable) essay.<sup>27</sup> Stasis for Carver is a social, *structural* consequence, not an existential condition or 'spiritual', essentialist presumption. 'The cause of the deformation...is also the potential remedy', and, in the third title story 'Cathedral', 'deformation' in the form of blindness becomes the 'structural basis for communication' through a reciprocal, social figuring of release, of adequation:

He found my hand, the hand with the pen. He closed his hand over my hand. 'Go ahead, bub, draw,' he said. 'Draw. You'll see. I'll follow along with you. It'll be okay. Just begin now like I'm telling you. You'll see. Draw,' the blind man said.

So I began. 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.

'Swell,' he said. 'Terrific. You're doing fine,' he said. 'Never thought anything like this could happen in your lifetime, did you, bub? Well, it's a strange life, we all know that. Go on now. Keep it up...'

'...It's all right...Close your eyes now,' the blind man said to me. I did it. I closed them just like he said...

'...Keep them that way,' he said. He said, 'Don't stop now. Draw.'

So we kept on with it. His fingers rode my fingers as my hand went over the paper. It was like nothing else in my life up to now.

Then he said, 'I think that's it. I think you got it,' he said. 'Take a look. What do you think?'

But I had my eyes closed. I thought I'd keep them that way for a little longer. I thought it was something I ought to do.

'Well?' he said. 'Are you looking?'

My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything.

'It's really something,' I said.(pp.446-7)

This 'structural basis' is, then, an adequate principle, unsustainable linguistically in the fictions of a semiologically fissured reality, or 'fundamental narrative', but sustainable structurally in the (reflexive) figure of the social or reciprocal 'threshold' itself as the 'activity of associations, contiguities, carryings-over (which) coincides with a liberation of symbolic energy'.

Carver's postmodern mimesis is, finally, a 'social' mimesis, one which has located a possibility for a new adequation not through a 'sacralized' relationship between iconic sign and thing, but through an exploration of structural bases for communication in the delinquent metonymy of his texts' 'disconnections, overlappings, variations': the performative processes themselves as they occur in the text-as-threshold between the typological poles of epistemic potentiality. It is in working from this 'social' contextualization that Carver's fiction can perhaps best be seen as capable of attaining a valid postmodern mimesis and adequation reaching well beyond the epistemic reductions of both 'classical' naivities and irrealist ultimacy.

## 2

If the reader-response methodologies of Iser's 'negativity' and, earlier, Isernhagen's *Leserappell*, have provided what has largely been a useful paradigm for identifying the epistemic possibilities latent in the postmodern fissures of Carver's texts, the very real problem remains of approaching those possibilities on their own epistemic terms.

So far it has been possible to articulate the question of adequation in Carver's texts in terms which, however qualified by a horizontal/vertical distinction, belong ultimately within a phenomenalist frame of reference. Examining the relationship between postmodern scepticism and realist representationalism in Carver's work in the light of the anti-representational prejudices of earlier self-conscious postmodern fiction and criticism has inevitably thrown this 'affective' bias into relief. Much of the criticism engendered by metafiction has centred on broadly phenomenalist issues and in putting Carver into a postmodern context the debate is bound to 'carry over' (Marc Chenetier's essay is perhaps the first significant contribution to it). But obviously every bias, however necessary, is guilty of sins of omission, and in this case the bias has deflected attention from the very foundation on which it has been built.

It has already been claimed that any phenomenalist 'metaphysics' of textual validation is simply paradigmatic to the 'physics' of Carver's texts; what is required then is a method which takes us out of paradigm, beyond considerations of the affective dimension of mimetic adequation which have necessarily 'muddied the waters', and towards a discourse which can allow us to apply to Carver's method not the question 'how do the texts mean for the reader?' but simply 'how do the texts mean?' That is, the inquiry must reach further than any Iserian validation of fiction which, though 'eerily echoing Carver's own definition of fiction' as Chenetier puts it, can only really show us that the concerns of reader-response criticism (the felt need for a fresh legitimization of epistemic possibilities in the wake of linguistic scepticism) are paralleled in the dynamics of Carver's texts. These dynamics for Carver are, however, always generated and resolved (or not) within the text; the affective threshold is not in fact echoed by his stories, rather the affective validation echoes out of the structural and linguistic chasms charted and sometimes crossed by his fictions. As Alain Arias-Misson has commented on Carver's moments of adequation:

In Carver's stories the operative element is literary in the specific sense, a solution *of* language, not *in* it; all the more notable as it wrenches us out of a quasi-naturalistic environment.<sup>28</sup>

In fact, if we are to locate the new realism accurately and usefully with reference to the postmodern terrain it is arguably more helpful to orientate ourselves not so much in relation to the 'slippery ice' of Derridean ultimacies (or rather to the successive exploitations of the ultimacies he has heralded) but far more to the 'rough ground' of the later Wittgenstein, an orientation interestingly explored by Charles Altieri who suggests:

[T]he grand testament of [Wittgenstein's] work is that so long as one is alive to what constitutes the conditions of his existence and avoids the enchantments of deep structures, origins, and essences, he need never find a home because he has never lost it. Yet at the same time he must find a way to lose it if he is to recognize that it has never been lost. This is the key to his philosophical style and to one continuous project in modern literature.<sup>29</sup>

Certainly, if possibilities for a vernacular 'realist' fiction can exist within the aegis of postmodern awareness/scepticism, and, moreover can function outside

the parameters of that necessarily debilitating scepticism without recourse to phenomenalist 'jumps' into the metatextual, those possibilities are clearly rooted in a different theoretical soil to John Barth's exhausted possibilities, and are just as clearly of central importance to a tracing through the 1980s and beyond of the postmodern dynamic in fiction.

The ontological and epistemic unease permeating postmodern fiction is its hallmark; from metafiction through Peter Handke to the new American realism the question of language, of adequation in the face of an intensely felt epistemic breakdown has been central. Abrams' complacent conclusion in his critique of Derridean criticism 'The Deconstructive Angel' that 'insofar as we set ourselves, in the old fashioned way, to make out what the other means by what he says, I am confident that we shall come to a better mutual understanding',<sup>30</sup> may comfort liberal critics but is extra-terrestrial in the worlds of Joseph Bloch, Mel McGinnis and Bill and Arlene Miller; in the worlds that is of apparently 'representationalist' postmodern fiction. To penetrate the postmodern, deconstructive dilemma to any depth then is to go beyond simple either/or linguistic dichotomies. Derrida's assault on the classical myths of knowing and telling is grounded not in arbitrariness and perversity but in a necessary dissolving of the rhetoric (necessary because, as Wittgenstein has written, 'A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably'<sup>31</sup>) of the 'initial and decisive' classical myth of essential, *a priori* Being, from which every other myth of epistemic inviolability derives.

If there is to be a genuinely new adequation born out of the postmodern turn its dynamic will not derive from a species of an Abrams-like pragmatism; rather it will have to be definable in terms of nothing less than an ontological exploration into postmodern possibilities of being, and only then into the postmodern possibilities of knowing and telling. Henry Staten in his book *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (partly an extension of and reaction to Altieri's earlier

article) points a possible way out of essentialist, reductive aesthetic ultimacy in his distinction between a 'metaphysical' and 'deconstructive grammar'. Commenting on remarks 193 and 194 of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* Staten writes:

Whereas 'metaphysical grammar' [a 'classical' grammar which functions by generating binary oppositions on the assumption of essential being, which then become hierarchical and allow a subordination of 'accident' to 'essence'; Staten gives the examples of 'ideal or logical and empirical, *a priori* and contingent...meaning and sign, soul and body and so on'] subordinates accident to essence, the empirical to the logical...'deconstructive grammar' does not. Rather it attempts to let *accidental being* operate upon deconstructive writing, deforming it and preventing it from achieving transcendental form.(p.18 Italics mine)<sup>32</sup>

In Carver's fictions we can of course find many examples of such 'deconstructive' writing. 'Are You A Doctor<sup>?</sup>', for example, as has been noted earlier, uses deferment of identity (of 'essential' being) in order to finally destabilize the security of identity, the ontological 'transcendental' (as opposed to 'accidental') 'form' of the protagonist: the questions 'are you a doctor?' and 'Are you there Arnold...You don't sound like yourself' resonate as interrogations of identity, highlighting an all-pervasive root *contingency* of being. The story is more than anything else a story of choices, though choices made without knowledge, in the face of an intractable deferment of knowledge. There is no subordination of 'accident to essence' then, thematically or structurally: the 'being' or ontology of both the narrative text and its protagonist is an 'accidental being', not a 'transcendental form' since at every point the ongoing construction of both is contingent, indeterminate, non-h<sup>ie</sup>ierarchical (there is no knowledge given by the text which is withheld from its protagonist). The inessential, desacralized ontological status of the protagonist therefore is inextricably bound up with the ontological status of the 'authority matrix' of the text, a status perfectly consonant with Staten's 'Wittgensteinian' formulation of 'accidental being'. Both text and character are constituted by one 'deconstructive grammar'.

Again, in the brief early sketch 'The Father' this 'kinship' can be seen in the dynamics of the aesthetic effect. Here the 'ideal' of secure, essential identity is powerfully and disturbingly challenged through the figure of the baby:

The three little sisters and the mother, who had just gotten out of bed and was *still not herself*, and the grandmother all stood around the baby, watching it stare and sometimes raise its fist to its mouth. He did not smile or laugh, but now and then he blinked his eyes and flicked his tongue back and forth through his lips when one of the girls rubbed his chin.

The father was in the kitchen and could hear them playing with the baby.(p.40 Italics mine.)

The grouping of no less than three generations around this baby is significant, not only as regards questions of essence (it is a picture of *contextualized*, already socialized, being of course) but also as regards the key tension this contextualizing inexorably constructs. Basically the tension revolves around a process of 'hunt-the-referent' to recall Gavin Edwards' phrase, the tension arising from the fact that the referent in question, the baby's identity, is, in typical postmodern fashion, nowhere to be found:

'But who does he look like, who does he look like?' Alice cried, and they all moved up closer around the basket to see who the baby looked like.

'He has pretty eyes,' Carol said.

'All babies have pretty eyes,' Phyllis said.

'He has his grandfather's lips,' the grandmother said. 'Look at those lips.'

'I don't know...' the mother said. 'I wouldn't say.'

'The nose! The nose!' Alice cried.

'What about his nose?' the mother asked.

'It looks like somebody's nose,' the girl answered.

'No, I don't know,' the mother said. 'I don't think so.'

'Those lips...' the grandmother murmured. 'Those little fingers...' she said, uncovering the baby's hand and spreading out its fingers.

'Who does the baby look like?'

'He doesn't look like anybody,' Phyllis said. And they moved even closer.(p.40)

Up to this point the deconstructive dynamic in the text is fairly straightforwardly Derridean: the rhetorical search for the 'transcendent signified' is sucked haplessly into an absent centre, just as the circle around the baby is drawn nearer by 'He doesn't look like anybody'. But Carver provides a further key twist:

'I know! I know!' Carol said. 'He looks like *Daddy!*' Then they looked closer at the baby.

'But who does Daddy *look* like?' Phyllis asked.

'Who does Daddy *look* like?' Alice repeated, and they all at once looked through to the kitchen where the father was sitting at the table with his back to them.

'Why, nobody!' Phyllis said, and began to cry a little.

'Hush,' the grandmother said and looked away and then back at the baby.

'Daddy doesn't look like *anybody!*' Alice said.

'But he has to look like *somebody,*' Phyllis said, wiping her eyes with one of the ribbons. And all of them except the grandmother looked at the father, sitting at the table.

He had turned around in his chair and his face was white and without expression.(p.41)

A makeshift 'transcendent signified' has in fact turned up, and turns out to be none other than the unfortunate father. The point, however, is that the father too 'doesn't look like anybody'. The father, like the baby, is deprived of identity through being identifiable only in possessing an 'accidental' conglomeration of physical features. Through being, that is, deprived of the social, contextual essence which gives the women in the story their security, their *grammar* of being as opposed to the father and son's 'accidental being'.

The distinction operates on the grounds of gender thematically, but conceptually then on the grounds of an alienation from, in Staten's phrase, 'transcendental form', here figured as a generational continuum, an ontological 'grammar' which confers essence on otherwise 'accidental', contingent being. In 'Are You A Doctor?' the deprivation of any 'transcendental form' such as a known profession (this particular lack being the point of the title of course) leaves us with another face presumably 'white and without expression' at the close of the story. In both narrative cases, then, the significances of the very different 'existential' crises resonate with all but identical semiological implications - implications concerning, ultimately, an ontology of the text, since the loss of identity, of security of being, is a 'rhetorical' (in the fullest sense of the word) loss. A loss, that is, of the tropes and constructs of lived experience (identifications such as profession or simple resemblance) that endow 'accidental being' with that elusive, in the end as illusory as it is necessary, 'essence' of identity, of the (at once textualized) I.

Though the re-assertion of the ontological basis of deconstruction is essential to a study of the postmodern turn, it is, as these two stories indicate, the pursuit after the *implications* of an intuitive, aesthetic apprehension of 'accidental being' that traces the line delineating the nature and extent of the new realism's exploration of the postmodern terrain. Arguably, whereas the main body of postmodern fictional exploration has followed (consciously or not) the largely circular spoor of Derrida's 'monstrosity', Carver's realism has regained the no less sceptical (or 'uncanny' as Abrams terms it) but far more richly suggestive response of Wittgenstein:

If I were sometime to see quite new surroundings from my window instead of the long familiar ones, if things, humans and animals were to behave as they never did before, then I should say something like 'I have gone mad'; but that would merely be an expression of giving up the attempt to know my way about.<sup>33</sup>

Wittgenstein, and arguably with him, (though aesthetically rather than philosophically of course) Carver, move on from a dissolution of the metaphysics of presence towards a method not of inversion and persistent reductionism, 'the glimpse beyond and the parody of parody', but of a relative, *transitive* epistemology. Staten, summarizing Derrida's reductionism comments:

Derrida's move here is in the style of the classical moralists, and has the same motivation. He is looking for the flaw, the element of impurity, the *memento mori*, no matter how barely visible, that keeps anything from closing the final gap separating it from the perfection of the ideal... We could... consider such modern examples as the slight bruise that kills Ivan Illyich and the birthmark of Hawthorne's story by that name. (pp.119-20)

The comparison with the 'classical moralists' is telling: almost certainly one reason for the popularity of 'Derridean' as opposed to 'Wittgensteinian' deconstructive strategies amongst the early metafictionists especially is its 'moral', or even ascetic, temper, its 'ultimist' scorn for compromise paralleled by metafiction's scorn for the necessary 'straw man' of realist mimesis which has been discussed earlier in this thesis. But what, then, does Wittgenstein's method, (and arguably its literary correlative, the new realism) offer in its place?

In this context both Altieri and Staten draw attention to a key principle in Wittgenstein's explorations beyond the basic deconstructive axis of polluted or inherently compromised essence: the principle of what Staten terms 'transitive essences' (derived primarily from Wittgenstein's extended metaphors of family resemblances and facial expressions as pictures of the relativity of 'states of being' in sections 122 and 161 of the *Investigations*). In many ways this notion can be seen as Wittgenstein's version of Derrida's doctrine of the 'trace'. In both cases the deconstructive undercutting of ideal meaning is replaced by a relativistic theory of signification privileging the classically ignored attributes of each sign or signal - its semantic pluralism, its ideological/lexical heritage. But whereas the 'trace' is given a 'vertical' dynamic by Derrida, a dynamic which relentlessly destabilizes classical pretensions by boring down into the sign's always and 'essentially' compromised semantic past, thereby discrediting its presumption to 'mean', Wittgenstein's 'transitive essences' operate horizontally, producing an indefinite overlap of significations, not destructively undermining identity, but moving on from an already discredited ontology of ideal identity, putting in its place a 'social' ontology. In Staten's words:

To think a continuous series of transitional cases is to think the cases not as unitary and self-identical but as assemblages of characters that may be variously reassembled. In a way every character is essential, as part of the physiognomy of the case, and in a way none is essential because each is only an essence gradation. What I am calling the transitive essence is thus an identity that is a term in an identity continuum and has no distinct or unique essence boundary to separate it from the immediately surrounding terms. Because a transitive essence contains, as part of its own identity, characters that are spread across terms farther along the continuum as part of *their* identity, it is transitive - is already, within itself, part of the way along toward the essence or physiognomy of something distinct from it.(p.97)

It is not difficult to move from such a set of propositions to the 'essence gradations' of Carver's narratives - narratives which open and close at seemingly arbitrary points on an unknowable but implicit continuum; themes, such as the slow dissolving of relationships, the helpless descent into alcoholism, the losing of the fixed securities of work or marriage, all of which see the 'deconstructive angel' arriving not as an anarchistic demon but as a 'natural' condition (or 'form')

of life, a mundane though destructive, dissociative, sometimes terrifying presence to be endured. One thinks of a recurring Carverian 'horror', the child, whether of 'The Father', 'Feathers' or even of Carver's autobiographical essay 'Fires'. In such texts the deconstructive 'monstrosity' is quite literally 'mute, infant and terrifying', though again the deconstructive, 'monstrous' process becomes for Carver as for Staten, a 'moment' in a 'rhetorical' continuum, not its own negative, 'grammatically' fixed essence. The 'Derridean' infant of 'The Father' is superseded by the 'Wittgensteinian' infant of 'Feathers', still 'monstrous', but now figured with a comic/grotesque irony and without the formal pretensions of the fixed, 'essentialist' tableau of the earlier fiction:

It was an ugly baby. But, for all I know, I guess it didn't matter that much to Bud and Olla. Or if it did, maybe they simply thought, So okay if it's ugly. It's our baby. And this is just a stage. Pretty soon there'll be another stage. There is this stage and then there is the next stage. Things will be okay in the long run, once all the stages have been gone through. They might have thought something like that.(p.306)

Roland Barthes' image of the textual tapestry, the product of 'a serial movement of overlappings, disconnections, variations', echoing as suggestively as it does both the comic evading of essence of 'this stage and...then the next stage' and the Wittgensteinian notion of 'transitive essences' can be taken two ways. On the one hand we can follow Barthes himself and press the implications of such a text's (such an episteme's) lack of centre or given boundary, its lack of essentialist or 'theological' depth and hence its vulnerability, or openness to 'exploitation'; on the other hand, whilst these attributes are in no way denied, the emphasis can fall on the fact that though its essential plurality denies any of the 'loose threads' of discourse becoming privileged, the implication need not be an endless, speculative epistemology of unravelling, or 'striptease', but an epistemology (and ontology) of the 'society' of the fabric of textual (and all signifying) codes.

The signifying process in the new realist text is neither classical nor metafictional, nor metatextual; it is the concept of a 'social (because transitive)

ontology' which finally locates being and telling in Carver's stories and arguably in the fiction of the new realism as a whole. This 'ontology' is 'in excess of the real' not through any irrealist, 'vertical' ultimacy, but through the 'horizontal' excess of: 'Doesn't the analogy between language and games throw light here?...is there not...the case where we play and - make up the rules as we go along? And there is even one where we alter them - as we go along' or of 'I can look at the clock to determine what time it is: but I can also look at the dial of a clock in order to *guess* what time it is; or for the same purpose move the hand of a clock till its position strikes me as right. So the look of a clock may serve to determine the time in more than one way'.<sup>34</sup>

As Staten writes of such 'disruptive', 'in excess' dislocations in *Philosophical Investigations*:

Because Wittgenstein sees no transcendental form in orderly activities, he can argue that it would *always be possible to deviate* from the 'normal' sequence and yet for the deviation to be 'following a rule'...On Wittgenstein's account it is as though an activity were inhabited by a multiplicity of souls, and any one of them could at some stage take over and guide the sequence in its own direction.(p.103)

In other words, Wittgenstein posits a 'multiplicity' (or *society*) of transitive essences, of trace significances which inhabit the linguistic 'activity' of constructing meaning. The skeletal, graphocentric model of the text is not redeemed by a metatextual infusion therefore, because the model is not truly empty, it is simply not 'policed', not 'ordered' into any unified or metaphysical meaning.<sup>35</sup> It is in fact already vibrant with the 'society' of the conflicting 'souls' of potential significance; with the souls, that is, of rhetorical possibilities, and these possibilities become meaningful only in this context of multiplicity, of a 'meta-society' of contextual, sequential, or transitive significations.

Though this academic, rarefied vocabulary may seem very alien to the world of Carver's meticulously concretized prose, it in fact bears much more than a passing resemblance to the spirit of both the essay 'Fires' where we read 'My world was one which seemed to change gears and directions, along with its rules, every day'<sup>36</sup> and fictions such as 'The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off'. In

this story, and in many others of Carver's, we can quite clearly identify a 'dramaturgy of meaning' as it were unfolding in the text; a dramaturgy which seems in many ways almost a direct aesthetic correlate to the semiological dynamics posited above. Thus Carver works hard in the opening paragraphs to 'prime' the narrative with a series of self-deconstructing 'essences', charging a semiological 'orderly activity', the narrator's attempt to make sense of his father's life, with the anarchic pressures of 'a multiplicity of (narrative) souls':

I'll tell you what did my father in. The third thing was Dummy, that Dummy died. The first thing was Pearl Harbor. And the second thing was moving to my grandfather's farm near Wenatchee. That's where my father finished out his days, except they were probably finished before that.(p.241)

The 'innocent' use of 'essences', of signal reductions or distillations of experience in order to fix 'meaning' onto the actual flux of existence is, of course, classic realism's most ubiquitous trope, but in deconstructing it Carver does not simply make an epistemic/aesthetic point; rather he 'splits' the deceptively coherent, self-contained, atom-like essences in order to *release*, not just qualify, narrative potencies. Thus the narrator's reducing of his father's decline to three things, three 'essences', is far from innocently employed as a fictional device (as Adam Mars-Jones mistakenly assumed). 'I'll tell you what did my father in', we are confidently told, but then two of the causes are left wholly unexplained and the third and presumably most important, Dummy, explodes in a welter of discursive unknowns, of conflicting, 'jostling' narratives, a 'series of disconnections, overlappings, variations':

My father blamed Dummy's death on Dummy's wife. Then he blamed it on the fish. And finally he blamed himself - because he was the one that showed Dummy the ad in the back of *Field and Stream* for live black bass shipped anywhere in the U.S.

It was after he got the fish that he Dummy started acting peculiar. The fish changed Dummy's whole personality. That's what my father said.

I never knew Dummy's real name. If anyone did, I never heard it...I don't think he was really deaf. At least not as deaf as he made out. But he sure couldn't talk. That was for certain.(p.241)

Significantly, the one thing 'certain' in this account is that Dummy cannot speak - Carver thus sets him up as an ironic 'type' of essence: 'innocent' of

rhetoric, of discourse. But this innocence, this 'essential', iconic self-containment is of course illusory. Dummy, as the opening of the story shows, is at the centre of almost limitless signifying (rhetorical, discursive) interpretive confusions, constructions and lacunae; of, in other words, almost limitless signifying (narrative) potential.

We see then, very clearly, that the 'activity' of creating a 'grammar', an orderly 'transcendental form' for the lives of the narrator's father and Dummy, is deconstructed from within, not through any metafictional intrusion, but through the releasing of that grammar's silenced 'multiplicity of souls'. The liberation is fundamentally dissociative of course, but now the dissociative effect is simply one of an infinite number of rhetorical potentialities, not Derrida's inevitable 'monstrosity'. Thus in 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Love', the narrative prising apart of the 'transcendent signified' love releases rhetorical possibilities which are predominantly but not exclusively, or *necessarily*, dissociative. Though one rhetorical or discursive fragment from the shattering is the blackly comic/grotesque account of Terri's love affair with Ed:

'When I left he drank rat poison,' Terri said...'They saved his life. But his gums went crazy from it. I mean they pulled away from his teeth. After that, his teeth stood out like fangs. My God,' Terri said. She waited a minute, then let go of her arm and picked up her glass...

...'It gets worse,' Terri said. 'He shot himself in the mouth. But he bungled that too, poor Ed,' she said. Terri shook her head.(p.271)

another fragment, another gradation on the 'identity continuum' of the 'transitive essence' of love is Mel's attempt (touched on previously) to articulate a more rhetorically orthodox, but no less powerful (and no less elusive and evasive: "Can you imagine?"; "Do you see what I'm saying," he said,) encoding of love:

'Casts and bandages, head to foot, the both of them. You know, you've seen it in the movies. That's just the way they looked...Well, the husband was very depressed for the longest while. Even after he found out that his wife was going to pull through, he was still very depressed. Not about the accident, though...I'd get up to his mouth-hole, you know, and he'd say no, it wasn't the accident exactly but it was because he couldn't see her through his eye-holes...Can you imagine? I'm telling you, the man's heart was breaking because he couldn't turn his goddamn head and *see* his goddamn wife...'

...We all looked at Mel.  
'Do you see what I'm saying?' he said.(p.279)

We are reminded perhaps of de Man's 'deconstruction' in 'Semiology and Rhetoric' of a comic exchange between Archie Bunker and his wife:

It is not that there are simply two meanings, one literal and the other figural, and that we have to decide which one of these meanings is the right one in this particular situation...the very anger he displays is indicative of more than impatience; it reveals his despair when confronted with a structure of linguistic meaning that he cannot control and that holds the discouraging prospect of an infinity of similar future confusions, all of them potentially catastrophic in their consequences.<sup>37</sup>

Such a rhetorical unmasking of aporia is simply the beginning for many of Carver's explorations of course. Returning briefly to 'Will You Please Be Quiet, Please', we can see that Ralph Wyman's 'turning, marveling at the impossible changes he felt moving over him' is his final, 'redemptive' response to 'seeing quite new surroundings' in Wittgenstein's phrase, is the beginning of his casting off of the 'classical' securities of the stable, essentialist self-knowledge he begins with ('the prudent measure of himself that he made') and the taking on of a deconstructive acceptance of transition and the contingent release of potentiality. It is also the opening of the text itself to a 'deconstructive grammar' which is not the negatively essentialist, parameter-conscious epistemic grammar of metafiction, but the potentially parameter-challenging and transcending grammar of 'forms of life' grounded in 'social' or transitive essence, an interfacial ontology sited at the threshold of discourse, 'alive to what constitutes the conditions of...existence', continuous with, not seeking to represent 'that fundamental narrative in which our whole life is steeped'. 'Carver has *not* given a voice to his characters; he has given his characters to a voice'<sup>38</sup>, as Alain Arias-Misson writes, and as if echoing this, 'The deconstructive critique of language', Staten observes,

could even be phrased as a *denial that there is language*. Not, of course, a denial that we speak and write, that we have dictionaries and Berlitz schools and so on, but a denial that there is any *boundary of essence* between what we call language and what we think of as nonlanguage.(pp.20-1)

Again, in Frederick Barthelme's words: 'Then you remembered that experience itself was a language, even if it was a language mostly unknowable, in the sense *irreducible*'. The classical link therefore between grammar and logic, or grammar and Ideal meaning, is discounted and in its place is put an interweaving of, or society of, signifying 'souls' which inhabit, as 'forms of life', both speech acts and gestures, all the codes of human meaning, in fact, and which are governed not by 'the nature of things', not by an essentialist metaphysic, but only by a form of 'social contract', a contract open to both dislocation (the 'potential catastrophe' of de Man's 'Semiology and Rhetoric') and liberation (Ralph's inarticulate, inarticulable, since there is no 'boundary of essence between...language and...nonlanguage', embrace of being-in-the-world as an always non-essential, tenuous, contingent, *rhetorical* existence). The lives of both Ralph and his wife are violated or compromised by *différance* in the semiology of their lives' 'grammars', by traces (his past 'identity' as Jackson, a student drunkard, 'the "reference" within the Now, to a past Now',<sup>39</sup> and her brief affair at a party), and only in accepting that the basis of life is not an essential self-knowledge but an ongoing semiological continuum of identity and gesture in time (something Ralph's wife intuitively understands but which Ralph resists) can Ralph find release in gesture, in a new understanding of the 'sequential', contingent nature of their life together, naively denied by their vow to '*preserve forever* the excitement and the mystery of marriage'(p.167) but ironically fulfilled by a revised, 'darker' reading of the promise of 'mystery and excitement'. As de Man comments on Archie Bunker's confusion, 'The deconstruction is not something we have added to the text but it constituted the text in the first place'.<sup>40</sup>

The use of a terminology taken from linguistic philosophy is not paradigmatic to the concerns of the stories - the question of 'social' adequation, of interactive being and knowing, is the question of grammatical possibilities in a textual world governed by aphasia, aporia and the loss of communion. In the brief story 'I Could See the Smallest Things' Carver uses the simplest image of

division and separation, the fences between neighbours, not just as a metaphor of social breakdown in its usual sense, but as an index of an aporia fissuring the 'society' of the world of the text itself. What is at stake is not simply the social relationship between neighbours, but the relationship between dissociation and association, fragmentation and connection, delinquency and potentiality.

The story begins by structuring the narrator's defamiliarization along the dichotomous lines of a 'metaphorical' illumination (the moon) and the 'metonymic' tableau illuminated:

I got up and went to the window. A big moon was laid over the mountains that went around the city. It was a white moon and covered with scars. Any damn fool could imagine a face there.

There was light enough so that I could see everything in the yard - lawn chairs, the willow tree, the clothesline strung between the poles, the petunias, the fences, the gate standing wide open.

But nobody was moving around. There were no scary shadows. Everything lay in moonlight and I could see the smallest things. The clothespins on the line, for instance.(p.204)

The sense of a rift is widened still further in the next sentence: 'I put my hands on the glass to block out the moon. I looked some more. I listened. Then I went back to bed'. Clearly the essence of her defamiliarization is more than simply the result of insomnia. She has, quite literally, woken 'to see quite new surroundings from [her] window instead of the long familiar ones', the unearthly moonlight transforming the metonymic mundanity of a list of common objects, 'lawn chairs, the willow tree, the clothesline...' into a near litany of wonder.

Significantly, then, the effects of this dissociation are presented by Carver not simply in terms of an existential disjunction, but as an index to a dissociation which is epistemic, which is not an 'epiphanic' interlude in normal life but actually the generally unnoticed, or unacknowledged, mundane ground of that life. The fissure between a 'rhetoric' of perception (the moon as a face, illuminating the all-encompassing 'arms' of the hills around the city) and a strictly metonymic 'grammar' of limitation ('any damn fool could see a face there,') is not heralded by the story; rather the story is structured on this aporiatic principle. The text itself, then, is 'dissociated', is hung between a validation of the transformative light of metaphorical potentiality and a suspicion and retreat

from it into the metonymic particularities of a desublimated, desacralized linguistic/epistemic actuality. And this dissociation is the 'absent' heart of the text itself, is 'of language, not *in* it', in Arias-Misson's words.

In another of Carver's stories, 'Neighbours', we see a textualizing of very similar dynamics, though here much more fully worked out. David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips have already provided an in-depth study of this text in their article on voyeurism and dissociation in Carver's fiction,<sup>41</sup> but though the themes of voyeurism and dissociation are indeed central to the story, as Boxer and Phillips demonstrate, the concerns they highlight are of more than thematic significance. That is, the themes (or, as Carver would prefer it, obsessions) are not ends in themselves, nor simply indices to a powerful but essentially traditional, or classical mimesis, and Boxer's and Phillips' conclusion that:

His accuracy hits home; we put ourselves in the shoes of his characters, and we find, often, that the fit is alarmingly close. Reading Raymond Carver's stories is like peering into the windows of life through very powerful binoculars.<sup>42</sup>

does not exhaust their significance by any means.

But what, in that case, are these recurring 'obsessions' of voyeurism and dissociation indices *of*? Perhaps the most accurate answer to this is that they are indices of *transition*: indices of a re-shaping of the epistemic 'building blocks' of knowing and hence belonging in the social/textual world, a re-moulding of those always textual (though not always linguistic) 'blocks' into new and alien dimensions. Bill and Arlene cling together at the close of the story because their social and 'spiritual' contours have been re-cast, and, like altered pieces of a psychic and social jigsaw, they are excluded from the old, formally contextualizing niches they once fitted, just as they are, finally and tellingly, excluded from the Stones' apartment.

The process begins with a straightforward enough social 'game' of dissociation - 'Totemically, the Millers', as Boxer and Phillips put it, 'are shedding their own dull skins for the bright feathers of their neighbours'<sup>43</sup> - but from this starting point a spiralling down into a far more fundamentally transformative

'game' ('game' in the Wittgensteinian sense of the word where the concept of rules, or of a delimiting 'grammar of action,' becomes transitive or desacralized as ultimacy and becomes recognized as a tactical, or inessential and thus 'playfully' discursive epistemic ground) can be traced. This 'ur-game' is not simply a matter of 'dressing up', of temporarily slipping out of one social identikit and into another, but of casting off a whole network of social and personal structures, a whole 'classical grammar' of social and personal hierarchies, a whole ('form of') life, and the replacing of it with the 'deconstructive grammar' of dislocation and transition, a 'new world' where 'things, humans and animals...behave as they never did before'.

After the first visit to the Stones' apartment Bill finds himself disturbed by 'the feeling he had left something', and of course he has: the reserve, the strict 'grammar' which has characterized his life up to that point, distilled by Carver into the one phrase 'bookkeeping duties'. After the second visit Arlene begins to notice the creeping transformation:

'Let's go to bed,' he said.  
'Now?' she laughed. 'What's gotten into you?'  
'Nothing. Take your dress off.' He grabbed for her  
awkwardly, and she said, 'Good God, Bill.'(p.18)

The next day Bill goes a step further and stays away from work to have more time for exploring the Stones' apartment. From an initial sense of dislocation, then, Bill has rapidly spiralled to a position where not only the semiological structures of his internal life, his 'bookkeeping duties' are de-privileged, but also the semiological structures of external domestic and social routines (of course Carver's characters are often defined in relation to their work, or more typically their lack or loss of it, and the Miller's are no exception), and now a truly 'deconstructive grammar' is beginning to replace the old certainties, a new inessentialist grammar resonant with new and transformative possibilities: 'He tried to remember when the Stones were due back, and then he wondered if they would ever return. He could not remember their faces or the way they talked and dressed'(p.20). And later, when Arlene echoes these thoughts, Bill confirms

'It could happen. Anything could happen'(p.21). The old world, an old identity of stability and heirarchic, settled significances and meanings is dissolving along with the Stones' faces and mannerisms. Social and domestic identity, sexual identity and even physical identity is seen to become abruptly inessential, negotiable, transitive, as Bill Miller dresses before the mirror in both Jim and Harriet Stones' clothes and wonders at the face he sees staring back at him. Arlene too has undergone this same process of 'ontological dissolution', losing (loosing) the rigid structures, the epistemic 'rules', of knowing and being:

And then she said, 'Maybe they won't come back,' and was at once astonished at her words.

'It could happen,' he said. 'Anything could happen.'

'Or maybe they'll come back and...' but she did not finish.(p.21)

Boxer and Phillips describe this process in the story very well as 'disengagement from one's own identity and life, a state of standing apart from whatever defines the self, or of being unselfed',<sup>44</sup> and as far as it goes this notion of 'being unselfed' is fully accurate. However, Boxer and Phillips see the dénouement of such a process only in existential terms:

As his dissociated characters tentatively reach out toward otherness, Carver ambushes them, giving them sudden, hideously clear visions of the emptiness of their lives; even the most familiar takes on the sharp definition of the strangely unfamiliar. They become voyeurs, then, of their own experience.<sup>45</sup>

In fact the process does not simply end with a cathartic realization of dissociation; the dissociation is an index of transition, not of ambush, and the closing sense is not one of 'hideous emptiness' but of a, perhaps more terrifying, potentiality. Boxer and Phillips regard the breakdown of the fabric of the Millers' orthodoxy as, essentially, *only* a totemic series of role-reversals, and at the root of this reading is the familiar spectre of a 'classical' fantasy/reality, 'rhetoric'/'grammar' binary dichotomy: there is no transition involved, only a fantastic aberration, soon to be chastised by the return, if not of the Stones, then of the real limitations of 'real' life, in this case the prosaically locked apartment door. But outside that door Arlene's 'lips were parted, and her breathing was hard, expectant', and it is on this note of expectancy, of a new, unassured but

from this point on only contingently limited future of rejuvenated possibilities, and not of 'chastisement' or ambush, that the story ends. Furthermore, this new future begins not *with* the existential dissociations of Bill and Arlene, but *after* this transitional 'stage'. The 'deconstructive turn' begins with the ontological, with the dissolution of essential being, but culminates, if it *is* to culminate rather than to drift in an endless 'free-play', in a new, inessentialist, 'deconstructive grammar', a new epistemic framework for, and engine of, relation and adequation: Bill and Arlene cling together, *bracing themselves*, not conceding madness - Boxer and Phillips' 'fantastic aberration' - because to do so would 'merely be an expression of giving up the attempt to know [their] way about'. Again: 'the operative element is literary in the specific sense, a solution *of* language, not *in* it'.

The fact, then, that the dissociation and aporia afflicting Carver's world is typically the 'result' of a social/domestic disintegration, though initially used to rebut a 'metaphysical' reading of the stories can now be more constructively used as a basis for understanding just how the 'social ontology' functions as the potential 'structural basis of communication' in the texts; in other words, how the deconstructive negation of 'transcendental form in orderly activities' can open out into a 'rhetoric of life' which generates meaning not as an essence behind signification, whether 'present' or 'absent', but as the interactive, interlocking transitive *process* of signification and adequation itself. Carver plunges us into apparently de-contextualized beginnings and hauls us out at 'pre-seismic' endings not because behind what is told is a Hemingwayesque 'absent presence' of unwritten knowledge, but because such a method implicitly embraces both the deconstructive tenet that there can be 'no transcendental form in orderly activities' and simultaneously the re-adequative possibility, brought to fruition in stories such as 'Will You Please Be Quiet Please', 'Cathedral' and 'A Small, Good Thing', that the 'grammar' of life's signs and codes, deprived of the falsely transcendental, is thereby inseparable (as de Man demonstrates in 'Semiology

and Rhetoric') from the 'rhetoric', the endless potentiality or signifying potency of the 'social' fabric of signs and codes.

Much of the typical criticism levelled at Carver's work (and the work of contemporary American realism as a whole) stems from a misunderstanding of this central dynamic. Thus in his reading of 'Preservation', a text he sees as 'the archetypal Carver story', Michael Gorra quotes the last paragraph of the narrative and then goes on to ask:

Yet why should it end there? It is in no way an ending in their lives; dinner still has to be eaten, the floor mopped, the auction attended. Their lives will presumably continue in precisely the same way. What makes this extremely thin slice any better than one further down the loaf, what makes Carver's choice of an ending anything more than arbitrary? What makes the sight of her husband's foot next to a puddle 'the most interesting thing' Sandy will ever see? What makes this moment count?...One needs the details of...personal history...one needs the social detail, the context, that Carver's deliberately undersuggestive prose won't provide, and the story collapses under the weight of its own crust.<sup>46</sup>

This criticism is significant, though arguably only in that it can stand as a representative type of the preconceptions brought to critical readings of the new realism (preconceptions fostered perhaps by its exploitation of a 'low mimetic' method) based firmly and erroneously on existential, 'slice of life' expectations of the texts. Erronously because the 'solution' isn't in 'the social detail, the context', but is 'of language'. Gorra wonders 'what makes the sight of her husband's foot next to a puddle "the most interesting thing" Sandy will ever see', and if the reader is prepared only to look for the epiphanic then the question carries some weight; but the text just doesn't turn on that essentially classical or even Modernistic axis. In fact Sandy's 'epiphany' is deeply ironic rather than simply bathetic; it doesn't mark, and doesn't attempt to mark, a moment of 'meaning'; the trope is not metaphoric and unifying but metonymic and fragmentary. Carver is drawing the traces which litter the text (the image of the preserved iron-age man, Sandy's memories of her parents and so on) not *into* a unifying pattern but *outwards*, teasing the threads apart, or, to take a metaphor from the story itself, allowing the settled past and the securities of the stagnant present to 'thaw', to melt down, to trickle away. The story ends with Sandy's husband's feet

moving away from her, across the linoleum, like the meltwater. This 'dynamic' reduces not to an existential enlightenment but to a semiological crisis: Sandy, watching her husband's feet next to the water on the linoleum is not being awkwardly pushed by Carver into an unachieved epiphanic insight as Gorra supposes, but is confronted by an impasse in perception, in comprehension. The metonymically 'non-sensical' traces have suddenly slipped free of the rigid forms which keep them contingent and separate (the 'grammar' of everyday life) and, 'melted' by dissociation have 'pooled' into a 'rhetorical' ambiguity where even pork chops become charged with an almost sinister unfamiliarity:

She used her spatula to raise one of the pork chops. Then she lifted it onto a plate. The meat didn't look like meat. It looked like part of an old shoulder blade, or a digging instrument. But she knew it was a pork chop, and she took the other one out of the pan and put that on a plate, too.(p.320)

The literary process at work in this story is not the construction of an existential meaningfulness, but the opening up of an epistemic slippage, or fault, between a metonymic continuity (and *preservation*) and a 'metaphoric' chaos of signification, a flood of associations, of signifying potentiality. It is this that 'makes this moment count', as it counts not simply for Sandy but more importantly for the text itself, and it is at this point that a 'Modernist' reading must give way to a postmodern awareness of the depth of the semiological waters hidden beneath the puddles on the kitchen linoleum.

Adequation in Carver's texts is possible precisely because meaning or epiphanic illumination is absent in Gorra's 'classical' mimetic sense. Rather it is founded on the synecdochal, is sequential, and hence 'social': it is, finally, a threshold, not primarily between reader and text, but between, as for Handke's *Loser* of *Across*, potentialities for being, knowing and telling, always held in a necessary tension against the equal potentialities for dissociation, aphasic confusion and aporiatic silence. It is the 'twofold structure' of this 'negativity', this aporiatic fissuring of the characters' and their textual worlds' epistemic ground and security (the sudden flux into which the Millers are plunged, Sandy's bafflement, staring at her husband's feet) which draws out the text, opens it up to

create a threshold, rarely crossed but always glimpsed, even wrenching, from an apparently closed, limited and limiting vignette of phatic despair, the wordless, 'ungrammatical' wonder which Ralph is finally engulfed by, 'marveling at the impossible changes he felt moving over him'.

### 3

'Meaning', and so adequation, then, is not essentially locatable as such in Carver's texts. Rather it occurs through its withholding as settled significance, its deferment as epiphanic or metaphoric 'penetration'. It is finally only 'present' as a *dynamic* (whether of ~~dis~~ dissociation or adequation) and never as a stable *site* for archeologies of intention, revelation or summation. It is the product and producer of *social* significations; social in the sense that Wittgenstein's figures of language-as-game-rule and essence as family resemblance<sup>47</sup> are posited on a 'social' episteme, even ontology; and in Barthes' sense of aesthetic adequation as a matrix of 'disconnections, overlappings, variations'.

So far such a reading has been supported by a fairly representative selection of texts from Carver's first three major collections of short stories. But there is a further, highly significant dimension to this view of Carver's art. This dimension involves a study of an aspect of Carver's methodology so far passed over but fundamentally linked to the above observations on the adequate movement in his fiction: the practice of revision.

A study of Carver's use of revision not only provides a coherent overview of an aesthetic and epistemic radicalism so far only traced in the discrete dynamics of individual narratives, but also a means of properly appreciating a point in Carver's work which can be seen as very much a key development in his work: the revising of the representatively minimalistic, dissociative story 'The Bath', found in his second and certainly bleakest collection, and the re-casting of it as the adequate 'A Small, Good Thing' of *Cathedral*.

There are at least three levels on which we can conduct a study of Carver's practice of revision, though they of course interconnect. The first and most basic

is the level of a general habit of revision: 'For me', Carver says in an interview of 1987, referring to his practice of re-writing stories even after their initial publication, 'it was like conceiving a story and seeing it as unfinished business';<sup>48</sup> and again in the essay 'Fires' we read:

In one regard I was in no hurry to finish the story or the poem I was working on, for finishing something meant I'd have to find the time, and the belief, to begin something else. So I had great patience with a piece of work after I'd done the initial writing. I'd keep something around the house for what seemed a very long time, fooling with it, changing this, adding that, cutting out something else.<sup>49</sup>

This habit, or principle, of revision would seem to apply to virtually all of Carver's fictions included in the first three major collections, and whilst for this reason it doesn't offer any real insight into a study of particular texts in isolation, it does hold several implications borne out in more precise studies of comparative cases of revision.

In the first place there is certainly implied in the above comments a strong sense of *contingency* as regards the structural and figural 'mechanics of meaning' within any of his texts: rather than working towards an amplification or clarifying, Carver 'tinkers' on 'unfinished business'. The notion of 'unfinished business' suggest a coherent purpose to the revisions, not simply the gratuitous 'toying' with the text that the notion of 'tinkering' might at first suggest, but if this revisionist principle is not directed towards a 'revelatory' honing of 'meaning' (and quite apart from the discursive indeterminacy suggested by Carver's 'tinkering' the most cursory reading of Carver's fiction confirms this contention) and strengthening of the text's teleological determinacy (the classical goal of revision), what is it directed towards? Carver himself goes much of the way to answering this question through reference to a particular example; again in the essay 'Fires' he writes:

Not so long ago...I was in the middle of writing a short story when my telephone rang...On the other end of the line was the voice of a man who was obviously a black man, someone asking for a party named Nelson. It was a wrong number and I said so and hung up. I went back to my short story. But pretty soon I found myself writing a black character into my story, a somewhat sinister character whose name was Nelson. At that moment the story took

a different turn. But happily it was, I see now, and somehow knew at the time, the right turn for the story. When I began to write that story I could not have prepared for or predicted the necessity for the presence of Nelson in the story. But now...I see it is right and appropriate and, I believe, aesthetically correct, that Nelson be there, and be there with his sinister aspect. Also right for me is that this character found his way into my story with a coincidental rightness I had the good sense to trust.<sup>50</sup>

Though Carver is referring here to an influence on the act of composition rather than on the act of revision in the usual sense of the word, we can safely assume that the inclusion of 'Nelson' in the story ('Vitamins') was a revision of an initial 'telos', though a telos only partially committed to paper. As such this deceptively anecdotal recollection, like so many in the essay, sheds a great deal of light on the aesthetic which in governing Carver's method can also be seen as governing his progressive re-defining of previous limits to postmodern adequation. Very simply, we can arguably see in this account of composition/revision a means of creating textual significance which is founded on a fundamental *contingency*, not merely the almost universal aesthetic contingency of 'inspiration', but a 'violating', transitional contingency that radically, even disruptively and subversively, cuts across ('deforms') as well as initiates the putative telos. Significantly, Staten again furnishes an almost uncannily consonant theoretical vocabulary for this aesthetic praxis or 'grammar' of signification: "'deconstructive grammar"...attempts to let *accidental being* operate upon deconstructive writing, deforming it and preventing it from reaching transcendental form'. In this way Carver co-opts the *anarchic* postmodern significance, the wholly dislocated, 'floating' signifyer (the incorporation of the random phone call) but neither valorizes its arbitrarily metaphorical status as would, say, the metafictionist Raymond Federman ('my role, once I have set up the metaphor, is to decipher the meaning of that metaphor and write its symbolic meaning') nor neuters it by depriving it of its semiological relativity. Rather he 'socializes' it, charging the sign through both its fundamental randomness and its newly contiguous, metonymic relations within the text with a 'multiplicity of (competing-to-signify) souls'.

Carver's general principle of revision, then, can be seen as mirroring on the most basic of levels the structural dynamics of signification already traced as a purely 'internal' textual mechanism. Just as significance and even adequation is in many of his stories based on 'a serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations', on 'transitive essences', so, perhaps not surprisingly, the creative principle behind those significances is likewise based on a methodology, a 'grammar', of 'inessential meaning', Staten's 'accidental being' which 'operate(s) upon deconstructive writing, deforming it and preventing it from reaching transcendental form', (Carver's 'coincidental rightness' where rightness is not a fixed essence, not a determinate 'centripetal', 'hard grammar' of 'meaning', but a 'centrifugal', 'deconstructive grammar' of discursive, rhetorical potentiality). Carver's claim that, 'when I began to write that story, I could not have predicted or prepared for the presence of Nelson in the story' seem in this context almost a working aesthetic application of Staten's description of 'Wittgensteinian' meaning quoted earlier on page 100.

The significance of this primary methodology of 'coincidental rightness' is more than just that of furnishing a confirmation in practice of the dynamics already identified within the typological dynamics of the text, however. Revision, for Carver the honing of this 'accidental being' as opposed to any stable, metatextual teleology, can be further seen as fundamentally affecting, even dictating, over and above the narrative teleology, the adequative potential of the text's semiological 'energizing' (in the sense of Barthes' 'liberation of symbolic energy', a liberation as likely to be dissociative as adequative, of course).

This 'second level' at which revision operates can be identified through a comparison of two versions of a story bearing essentially the same narrative teleology (classically, and even in many Modernist fictions, the adequative or dissociative principle): the story titled 'Distance' in *Furious Seasons* (1977, and again in the later *Fires*) and titled 'Everything stuck to him' in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1982). Not only does this comparison highlight the postmodern, semiologically-orientated perspective essential for any

technical reading of Carver's work, but also, within the highly problematic aegis of postmodernism, the radical shifting by this new realism of mimetic potentiality away from the metaphorical pole of Federman's 'delinquent' symbolism (for all its desire to 'face up to reality and now what passes for reality' still locked in Idealist diegesis) and into the metonymic potencies of 'transitive essences', 'accidental being', 'coincidental rightness'; of, that is, the resonances of contingent significances and contiguous relations as tropic indices to being and meaning in the text. Thus we find that every significant change Carver makes in the 1977 text 'Distance' for the 'Everything Stuck to Him' of 1982 involves the texts vocabulary of relations, its grammar of association.

In general the changes Carver makes to the earlier 'Distance' are overwhelmingly dissociative - just as the ambiguous but finally unmistakable affirmations of 'Will You Please Be Quiet, Please' were almost programmatically crushed by the stasis and silence that closed its sister title story 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Love', so we see here from the same period a conscious widening and deepening of the semiological chasm Carver's texts had sometimes earlier been allowed to at least briefly straddle, if not as boldly as in 'Will You Please Be Quiet, Please' then at least through a persistent tension between an associative grammar and an alienating teleology, as we find in 'Distance'.

The first such tension occurs in the very first paragraph of 'Distance'. Consisting of just two short sentences this introduction to the main narrative firstly sets up a typically stark *raison d'être* for the father's story (the daughter's request for information) but then, significantly, adds both a dissociative edge and associative poignancy in the second sentence: 'She's in Milan for Christmas and wants to know what it was like when she was a kid. Always that on the rare occasions when he sees her'.<sup>51</sup>

The knowledge that this daughter sees her father only on rare occasions sets up a pervasive sense of alienation (of 'distance') between them of course which the father's narrative invests with many complex figural resonances (love/death,

union/separation, loyalty/constriction and so on) their imagery drawn from hunting and marriage. This is the dissociative edge which characterizes the teleology, then. But this knowledge of familial alienation given to us in this second, amplifying sentence, also works to create if not a value-judgement as such, then an implicit sense of relational expectations, relational norms which are being transgressed. The poignancy of this, again something reinforced in the narrative which follows, is fundamentally affirmative: the daughter's desire to know about her childhood is transformed from the starkly interrogative to the implicitly hurt, confused, alienated need to somehow 'relate' to a 'distanced' parent.

The full significances of the tensions seen in this first paragraph emerge even more clearly when the revision, 'Everything Stuck to Him', is held against it. Carver's revisions here consist mainly of excisions, and the first thing to be excised is indeed the second sentence just discussed, it being a primary hallmark of the associative/dissociative tension which previously hallmarked the story. Suddenly a relational tension becomes a relational pathology of sorts, the father semiologically assaulted by a faintly menacing stranger, 'a cool, slim, attractive girl, a survivor from top to bottom', who also happens to be his daughter. In 'Distance' the description of her is ironic, even poignant, suggesting a brittleness which only masks her emotional need; in 'Everything Stuck to Him' the description is far more two-dimensional, though identically phrased, this 'new' daughter's description operating almost as a tormenting 'foil' to the father's 'failure' in love and life. The reason for this lies not only in the deletion of the second sentence of course, but in a relentless emotional 'freezing' of the narrative's grammar and vocabulary, in fact of the more 'supple' linguistic tensions and ambiguities of 'Distance'. We find this, then, from 'Distance':

They were kids themselves, but they were crazy in love, this eighteen-year-old boy and his seventeen-year-old girlfriend when they married. Not all that long afterwards they had a daughter...

...The boy and girl, husband and wife now, father and mother, lived in a three-room apartment under a dentist's office. Each night they cleaned the upstairs office in exchange for their rent and utilities. In the summer they were expected to maintain the lawn

and the flowers, and in winter the boy shovelled snow from the walks and spread rock salt on the pavement. The two kids, I'm telling you, were very much in love.(pp.131-2)

subtly transformed into this, from 'Everything Stuck to Him':

They were kids themselves, but they were crazy in love, this eighteen-year-old boy and this seventeen-year-old girl when they married. Not all that long afterwards they had a daughter...

...The boy and girl, husband and wife, father and mother, they lived in a little apartment under a dentist's office. Each night they cleaned the dentist's place upstairs in exchange for rent and utilities. In summer they were expected to maintain the lawn and the flowers. In winter the boy shovelled snow and spread rock salt on the walks. Are you still with me? Are you getting the picture?<sup>52</sup>

Throughout the revised passage we can find evidence of a systematic 'freezing' in full keeping with the implications deduced from the excision of the second sentence. To begin with the possessive 'his' of 'his seventeen-year-old girlfriend' becomes the dismissive 'this' in the second version. And a similar technique is used when Carver adds a mannered 'they' to the phrase 'they lived in a little apartment'. Carver does the opposite in deleting the 'their' from the original 'their rent and utilities', but to a similar end. The tiny revision, along with the increased emphasis on the dentist's ownership of the property contained in the added 'the dentist's place upstairs' just does enough to unsettle the sense of security, of 'belonging' which runs so much more strongly through the passage from 'Distance'. Finally we find a rare expansion, though its purpose is not to elucidate, rather to amplify the antagonistic intensity of the underlying conflict which, as becomes ever clearer, is the sub-text of the revised story: 'Are you still with me? Are you getting the picture?' the father narrator interrogates needlessly and, in this phatic context, aggressively.

All these minor but very telling revisions point to one thing - a freezing or 'brutalizing' of the narrative in the interests of a wide ranging dissociation embracing both fictional characters, the ur-narrator, or authorial voice and the reader (even the fairly revealing title 'Distance' becomes the far more opaque 'Everything Stuck to Him'). A covert semiological hostility, then, pervades the new narrative; the new title, the narrative's focal sign, is hostile to the reader; the narrator's vocabulary (linguistic and gestural) is hostile to the daughter (the

vocabulary used to describe the boy's dealing with her as a crying baby is altered in several places and always to dissociating effect); the grammar of the text itself becomes hostile to its referents - mannered, minimalistic, its clipped, reluctant concreteness relentlessly deferring.

What is clear then is that these two texts, despite sharing the same narrative teleology, are epistemologically all but polarized through the process of revision. The 'knowledge' embodied by 'Everything Stuck to Him' is not simply hermeneutically different to the 'knowledge' embodied in 'Distance'. Rather a wholly different *form* of knowledge, of telling, is manifested in the revision, one which resists its own embodiment in language, which in fact resides more in the interstices of frustration between signifier and signified, teller and told, text and world. Many such texts have already been studied in this thesis of course, but the point now is not so much the nature of just such a semiologically brutalized text, but the fact that such a fundamental epistemic disruption characteristically consists for Carver not in a fixed telos or narratological 'essence', but in exploiting a transitive, inessentialist restlessness within the text's grammar and vocabulary of relations. 'Everything Stuck to Him', when held in contrast to 'Distance', is perhaps the clearest example of how this process of creating epistemic 'delinquency', brought to perhaps its purest expression in 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Love', operates; a process which for Carver grounds revision in 'a serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations'.

As mentioned above, however, there is a further, third level to Carver's method of revision, beyond both the basic principle of revision in the creation of the text and beyond the use of revision as a dissociative, epistemologically aggressive, diminishing tactic. On this level revision functions in a similar way to that seen in Carver's re-working of 'Distance', but to an opposite end: that of creating in the text an associative dynamic, that of *earning* adequation 'not through psychological detail, but through the poetic authority that springs from an honest grappling with nearly unbearable tensions'<sup>53</sup> as Josh Rubins remarks

of 'Fever'. In examining the relationship between 'The Bath' and 'A Small, Good thing' we arguably see precisely this adequate dynamic in motion, as it were.

Not surprisingly, 'A Small, Good Thing' has become a representative text for almost every critic concerned with the development in Carver's art marked by the collection *Cathedral*. Opinion as to its merits obviously varies, but the nature of and reasons for these variations are, it would seem, far less important than the often identical presuppositions brought to bear in the majority of readings of the story. One major reason for this is that the text is, of course, the product of an extensive revision. As a result of this fact almost every analysis tends to situate the story in direct opposition to 'The Bath', seeing it as almost a 'repentance' of sorts, a belated embrace of humanistic values through the loosening of an obsessively mannered, minimalist prose and the apparent investing of a previously fragmented, cryptic telos with a figurally rich, redemptively conclusive narrative dynamic. Thus we find that W.L. Stull's grounds for seeing the fiction as a 'minor masterpiece of humanist realism' are that 'where "The Bath" was the inconclusive, fragmentary tale of an existential disaster, "A Small, Good Thing" is a fully developed tragedy'.<sup>54</sup> In fact for Stull, the central significance of 'A Small, Good Thing' is its implicit rejection of what he, following Linda Chase, terms 'existential realism' with its 'angst and anomie' in favour of what he takes to be an all but Christian realism, complete with symbolic sub-text: 'A subtle but pervasive pattern of religious symbols in "A Small, Good Thing" suggests the presence of a third kind of love in Carver's work since *What We Talk About*, Christian love.(p.11)

Though few critics are as straightforwardly hermeneutic in their readings of the story, the basic presumption is commonplace - 'A Small, Good Thing' is adequate, even figurally redemptive in intent and execution because its realism has become humanistically expressive, become a vessel of 'presence', that 'presence' consisting in, if not quite Stull's 'account of spiritual rebirth'(p.11) then perhaps 'hope springs eternal', at least.

There is, however, a very different way of approaching the undoubted challenges to the existential 'angst and anomie' so relentlessly evoked in 'The Bath' that this revision manifests. Few critics, in their hurry to ease Carver out of the un-American clutches of a minimalistic scepticism have bothered to do anything more than identify the contrasts between 'A Small, Good Thing' and 'The Bath', but arguably the relationship between the two is far more complex than simple, oppositional readings suppose. It can certainly be contested that rather than pushing aside the semiological explorations into textual meaning and being which hallmark Carver's 'pessimism', this later text pushes those same postmodern explorations further forward still - beyond a simple 'pessimism' or 'angst and anomie' as is so often remarked, but also beyond the simple, vacuum-abhorning 'optimism' too easily put into its place.

In fact, 'A Small, Good Thing' is remarkable in the context of Carver's earlier fiction not because it signals a re-orientation towards a 'humanist (far less Christian) realism' and a corresponding abandonment of semiological 'engagement', but because it signals a willingness to move the realist text radically on into epistemic tensions and confusions, risking more than just a peering down into the aporiatic *mise en abyme*, risking now something like a typological high-wire performance over it, so to speak. It is in this risk, in the situating of the text amongst previously unacknowledged tensions and contradictions that the adequate potency of 'A Small, Good Thing' is to be found - and it is always a potency, not an achieved, humanistic, symbolically figured point of rest, of conclusive affirmation.

To properly appreciate the radicalism of this story then we need not ~~to~~ abandon the broadly postmodern conceptual matrix in favour of a search for 'presence' or 'essence'; rather to extend it in accordance with the new complexities this narrative creates. Certainly as regards the narrative teleology the revisions of 'The Bath' seem to be directed at little more than providing a more 'human' drama, complete with tragic denouement and redemptive ending, and this is the level at which the text is almost invariably addressed. Arguably

however, the re-written prose, far from defusing the scepticism and menace of 'The Bath' actually works against its new, deceptively stabilized telos, thereby *internalizing* tensions and contradictions previously only *affectively* present, the text itself thereby becoming resonant not through the existential dis-ease produced in the reader by the previously 'brutalized' narrative, but through a deeper, more complex semiological dis-ease inherent in the text's subverting and subverted 'society' of codes and constructs.

For instance, one of the most striking series of revisions in 'A Small, Good Thing' is that concerning the characterization of Ann Weiss. On the basis of even the briefest comparison she seems to emerge in the second text as a far more 'human', 'essentially' constituted realistic character. We are now given her full name in just the second paragraph, and given it by the now omniscient narrator - 'she gave the baker her name, Ann Weiss, and her telephone number'(p.331) this narrator tells us. In 'The Bath' of course there is not only a characteristic deferral of 'the mother's' identity, but a menacing use of the name by the ambiguous, again unnamed, voice on the phone at the close of the story. Previous to this we find only Ann herself giving her name as part of her attempt to share her suffering with another family at the hospital; the giving of the power of naming in precisely opposite circumstances to this sinister, anonymous voice is a major source of the story's dissociative power. The 'icon' of the name, the classic denotation of 'presence' in the realist text ceases to function as a safe, stable sign of essential identity, the primary tool of representation, and becomes a 'discursive', violating tool of manipulation. In 'The Bath', then, the withholding of Ann Weiss's name is not simply a device to generate tension, it is an act of epistemic disruption, a radical (though for Carver typical) assault on the complacencies of the realist text.

The revision therefore can easily be seen as a direct repudiation of these subversive, disruptive strategies, and not surprizingly W.J. Stull takes this to be the case:

In 'A Small, Good Thing', the minimally developed characters of 'The Bath' take on flesh, blood and consciousness...Carver early introduces Ann Weiss by name and sets forth her essence - her preconceptions, her need for community...Even the secondary characters - Dr. Francis, Dr. Parsons, the black family Ann passes in the waiting room - are given essential identities.

Moreover, instead of highlighting, as in 'The Bath' the existential isolation that suffering imposes, Carver here works in the manner of George Eliot, enlarging rather than contracting human sympathies.(pp.8-9)

Certainly such a reading can be supported by a great deal of superficial evidence: apart from Ann Weiss's actual naming we also find Carver devoting far more space in the revised text to what Stull terms her 'essence', her thoughts and feelings. According to this reading not only does Ann Weiss become more revealed, but the epistemic radicalism of the earlier narrative voice consequently disappears. However, a close analysis of Mrs Weiss's 'essence' reveals a much more ambiguous situation than that identified by Stull. The 'essence' that Carver now endows the character of Ann Weiss with is hardly the stuff of great psychological realism, the tradition Stull believes Carver to be embracing:

She gave the baker her name, Ann Weiss, and her telephone number...The baker was not jolly. There were no pleasantries between them, just the minimum exchange of words, the necessary information. He made her feel uncomfortable, and she didn't like that. While he was bent over the counter with the pencil in his hand, she studied his coarse features and wondered if he'd ever done anything else with his life besides be a baker. She was a mother and thirty-three years old and it seemed to her that everyone, especially someone the baker's age - a man old enough to be her father - must have children who'd gone through this special time of cakes and birthday parties. There must be that between them, she thought. But he was abrupt with her - not rude, just abrupt. She gave up trying to make friends with him. She looked into the back of the bakery and could see a long, heavy wooden table with aluminium pie pans stacked at one end; and beside the table a metal container filled with empty racks. There was an enormous oven.(p.331)

But if this isn't an authentic attempt at great, essence-revealing psychological realism, and it surely isn't, what is it? One answer is clumsiness, but this would only be the case if it could be reasonably established that Carver is indeed trying to write a traditional, humanistic, essentialist portrait, and this simply doesn't seem to be the case. Far from 'setting forth her essence' Carver is rather highlighting the *banality* and contingent randomness of what is valorized in classic realism as 'essence' - the *constructs* that are the stuff of assurance and

security of being (precisely what is assaulted in the vast majority of his fictions): Ann Weiss, confronted by the taciturn 'otherness' of the baker retreats into the reassurance of a manifestly tenuous, brittle *code*. The signs that make up this code, the figures of fatherhood, cakes, birthday parties are significantly laid out in direct counterpoint to the signs of otherness, the physical objects (pie pans, empty racks, the enormous oven) which for Ann construct the unreadable, opaque code embodied in the baker. The true significance of this passage lies not in the commonplace, brittle, complacent expectations of a typical American mother, but in the placing of these 'innocent' expectations between the oppositional codes signalled by cakes and parties on the one hand and the physical intractability of pans, racks and ovens on the other. It is no accident in this masterfully structured story that Ann Weiss surveys these objects immediately on giving up trying to communicate with the baker, and the simple, irreducible physicality of the objects is quite clearly a counterpoint also to the psychological discursiveness which precedes their description.

It is a familiar Carverian opposition after all, then, between the two codes, or texts (familiar/unfamiliar, known/unknown) that generates both the tension and the peculiar horror of this story - the crux of the narrative is the crushing of the Weiss family between 'familiar' expectancy and the callous otherness of the 'unfamiliar' (a clash figured at its bluntest in the nature of the boy's accident, an anonymous hit-and-run which occurs on his birthday), a crux common of course to many earlier stories, such as 'Bicycles, Muscles, Cigaretts', as well as to the earlier version of the narrative 'The Bath'. What Carver has done in 'A Small, Good Thing' therefore is not eliminate this essentially semiological, postmodern subversion of humanistic, essentialist realism, but extend its earlier tensions into far more subtle and multivalent complexities which characterize the text's powerful clashing of irony and pathos, detachment and melodrama, 'essence' and contingency, banality and insight.

This complex subversion, as opposed to Stull's far simpler essentialism, can, if carefully traced, be followed throughout the re-written narrative. Obviously

however, the reading stands or falls on its ability to account for the most significant revision of all - the completely new ending of 'A Small, Good Thing'. Once again, at first reading, as with Carver's re-writing of Ann Weiss, there is a temptation to follow Stull:

In breaking bread together, the characters reenact the central rite of Christianity, the Lord's Supper...With a palpable sense of 'newness of life', the characters talk on into the dawn. The story ends with a sunrise - a classic symbol of the resurrection...What Carver first published as an existential tale of crass cruelty he thus offers anew as a story of spiritual rebirth, a minor masterpiece of humanist realism.(p.12)

All these 'symbolic' figures, the bread, the night, the dawn, are unquestionably designed to evoke precisely the classic sacramental resonances listed above, an admission that might seem to undercut the semiological orientation of this counter-essentialist reading. It doesn't simply because this is not *all* they evoke, or rather, they do not evoke these significances simply and unproblematically, as Stull assumes. The text itself in fact echoes back problematics and distortions to the initial affirmation. It is this 'doubleness' and resonant multivalence which elevates 'A Small, Good Thing' above almost all Carver's earlier fiction in both ambition and attainment and which provides for an adequate potency far more complex than the simple, even crass, symbolic affirmations of Stull's 'face value' reading of this text's conclusion.

There are two main events which demand close attention in this ending: Scotty's death (in 'The Bath' of course his fate is left in the balance) and the final confrontation with the baker. Both can be taken (and are taken by Stull) to be figurally redemptive, but by the same token both can be taken as occasions not for 'redemptive' significances but rather for opening up 'echo chambers' of sorts, ambivalent epistemic spaces between oppositional codes, oppositional hermeneutics, oppositional texts-within-the-text which serve to clash, distort and thereby desacralize the initially clear-seeming resonances of the 'redemptive' tropes.

For example, the account of Scotty's death is, as Stull is quick to point out, potentially loaded with almost Dickensian religious traces. The very nature of

Scotty's condition is, on this hermeneutic level, figural - the physical coma mirroring the baker's spiritual 'death-in-life'. Similarly, in the account of his actual death we can find echoes of the crucifixion:

The boy looked at them, but without any sign of recognition. Then his mouth opened, his eyes scrunched closed, and he howled until he had no more air in his lungs. His face seemed to relax and soften then. His lips parted as his last breath was puffed through his throat and exhaled gently through the clenched teeth.(p.345)

The cry before death, the focus on the final exhalation, all carry strong biblical undertones: 'And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and breathed his last'<sup>55</sup> as Mark's Gospel tells us, immediately following on with an account of the conversion of the centurion under the cross and the tearing of the Temple Veil in two, both figures of renewed access to God, Truth, adequation. And it is not difficult to identify this last significance with the way in which the Weiss's are brought more fully together and into human understanding through Scotty's (in this sense redemptive) suffering. Thus Ann Weiss is now allowed to find some form of communion with the Negro family who have also lost a son, whilst in 'The Bath' this family appeared only to highlight the existential intensity and isolating dissociation of suffering - "Nelson" is all this mother from the earlier story can bring herself to say in response to Ann's own compulsion to explain her plight.

But again this 'redemptive' reading of the revisions seems more than a little problematic on closer inspection; indeed an alternative interpretive complexity 'haunts' the more obvious figural affirmations. The coma, for instance, works as a trope not merely in the humanistic context of the baker's 'flawed essence', but also, and more directly perhaps, in relation to the oppositional structuring of the text's semiological significances: Scotty is, like his mother and finally like the narrative itself, held in tension between oppositions, between contradictions. For his mother this entrapment takes the form of a conflict between the familiar, the 'textually' secure and the unfamiliar, the unpredictable, 'unreadable', the other which is the baker as both character and voice and the wholly 'other', inhuman indifference of circumstance itself. For Scotty the entrapment occurs

first within the opposition between the hit and run incident and traditional birthday significances (birthdays are, after all, signals and affirmations of the continuation of life), and secondly within the entrapment of the coma, the crystallizing of all those entrapments into the ultimate opposition of life and death. The coma is, then, primarily a crucial figure of a tension between oppositions; Scotty's coma figures perfectly the 'hidden agenda' of semiological conflict which underlies the superficially 'humanistic', straightforwardly affirmative text.

In a similar way Scotty's actual death strongly resists a simple, single figural explication: the death is perversely random, from the initial road accident to the 'one in a million circumstance' of the 'hidden occlusion'. Hardly an unproblematic parallel with the redemptive determinism of the crucifixion. Likewise it seems almost gratuitously painful - Carver makes a point of avoiding the simplest and most obvious means of moving from coma to death, a quiet passing away, in favour of the disturbing violence of the chosen scene. For all the possible religious significances adhering to the account, it unarguably exists primarily as a purposefully harrowing depiction of random, irreducibly meaningless death. The apparently redemptive adequate consequences of it are almost mocked by the 'absurdity' of it, and certainly at the very least made highly contingent by it. It is interesting to compare Christ's recognition of Mary before death and Carver's 'The boy looked at them, but without any sign of recognition'(p.345).

What we arguably find then is not simply a religious sub-text, but a series of signal oppositions, even contradictions, again in keeping with the patterns of semiological disruption already discussed. The death scene can perhaps be best described as a locus, a site of semiological friction, and it is this friction, not any one semiological index (of, say, religious typologies) that, in its 'liberation of symbolic energy' produces the adequate 'heat and light' of 'A Small, Good Thing', as can be even more clearly seen in an analyzing of the final and most drastic revision - the Weiss's actual confrontation with the baker.

Once more it is possible to construct a wholly 'optimistic' reading around this episode. Apart from the sacramental imagery of the bread, we are seemingly faced here with the clearest indication yet of an abandonment of the dissociative semiological tensions of 'The Bath'. This earlier story ends of course with Ann Weiss's frantic interrogation of the anonymous voice, firmly locating the dramatic suspense of the narrative in the deeper epistemic 'suspense' of semiological deferment and disruption. Once this particular dramatic dénouement is discarded the way then seems open for a discarding of the postmodern semiological/epistemic drama it represented. However, it can be shown that though this initial dissociative strategy of suspense has been superseded in 'A Small, Good Thing', the thematic strategy put in its place (the Weiss's eventual confrontation and reconciliation with the baker) is just as, and maybe more, deeply semiologically engaged. Though we do indeed see adequate dynamics in this closing scene, their final significance is arguably semiological, not theological; they remain dynamics, relational and so inessential - adequate potencies not settled claims to adequation.

All this can be seen simply through looking more closely at the two main figural presences in this part of the text, the 'sacramental' bread and the 'resurrection' light.

The most striking thing to be noticed in any careful analysis of the figural significances of the light in the bakery, for instance, is that within just the two last short sentences of the story we are presented with no less than three images of it:

They swallowed the dark bread. It was like daylight under the fluorescent trays of light. They talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving.(p.352)

Furthermore, this plurality of reference (illusion of daylight, fluorescent light, actual dawn light) is figurally ambiguous, even problematic as far as any neat 'redemptive' hermeneutics is concerned. A faintly disturbing reversal has been set up, the artificial light of the bakery is 'like daylight', the simile producing a positive, resonant equivalence when set against the darkness of the bread, but

then this equivalence, this figural linkage, is disrupted, is broken down. The cause of the disruption is the intrusion of the 'real' - the figure of the weak, but authentic, light of dawn works in at least three ways as a dissociative trope: its placement disrupts the figural equivalence of the light/dark opposition, its presence reminds of the falseness, the artificiality of the baker's 'trays of light' and its own qualities, its remoteness and paleness, serve both to strengthen the opposition between it and the 'false' light and also to create figural resonances of its own, far removed from the neat 'redemptive' equivalences (structured around the *fluorescent* light) which precede it. One has only to recall the 'snowy light' from the T.V. that closes 'Where Is Everyone?' (another revised story), the 'terrible' sunrise of 'The Student's Wife' and the 'sky turning grey' and the 'birds starting up' in 'Menudo' to realize that dawn in Carver's world generally figures desperation, even despair, not any intimation of 'spiritual rebirth'. Rather what we see is something much more interesting, namely the deconstruction of the classical tropes mentioned on precisely their own terms. Light deconstructs light. The real dynamic here is to be semiologically, not hermeneutically defined. The dissociative threat is rooted in the plurality of the sign, the deprivation of expected essence, the anarchy of the trace. The figure of light is another locus, then, just as Scotty's coma and death are, of a semiological conflict, and in that conflict of 'a liberation of symbolic energy'.

Again, in analyzing the figure of the bread, we can see perhaps even more clearly how the dynamics of this semiological conflict push the text into adequate resonances more authentic, complex and wide-ranging than any of the hermeneutically derived essentialist affirmations that are typically brought to bear on it. Though the contradictions inherent in Carver's use of this figure are less complex than those 'inhabiting' the motif of light, because of this greater directness it is this figure that finally emerges as the primary point of disturbance and challenge in the text - it is after all the 'small, good thing' of the title.

Even more so than the figure of light in this part of the narrative, the bread motif initially offers itself as an almost blatantly religious significance, and even

more so than with the above reading of the 'light' motif, a more than superficial hermeneutics must first of all contextualize this apparently straightforward use of the trope before its fuller, though more elusive, significances can be approached. As with the figure of 'light' we find that this semiological contextualization results not in the strengthening of an 'iconic' significance, but in an 'internal' disruption, a contained 'explosion' within the sign that both fractures and releases.

The key to this disruption is Carver's structuring of figural oppositions which at first appear as inter-signal oppositions, but which can actually be seen as forcing open the focal sign itself (the bread) and revealing intra-signal oppositions and contradictions. The most obvious of these inter-signal, or 'external' oppositions has already been noted, namely the light/dark opposition which can now be seen to initiate a reversal of sacramental as well as resurrection motifs: whereas the Mass or Eucharist is traditionally performed in a reverential near darkness with white wafers of bread, here we find a crude, glaring fluorescent brightness and a 'heavy', 'rich', 'dark' bread.

Another 'external' opposition is again set up just before the breaking of the loaf: 'He had a necessary trade. He was a baker. He was glad he wasn't a florist. It was better to be feeding people. This was a better smell anytime than flowers'(p.352). The figures in opposition are again religious - the bread, of course, and the flowers which also function as 'sacraments' at weddings, funerals and so on. More to the point, in both these sets of oppositions concerning the bread we find an identical basis for figural conflict - the irreducible physicality of the bread, its resistance to any easy figural usurpation of its presence. Carver insists on a relentlessly concrete and richly sensuous apprehension, foregrounding the smell of the bread, the 'taste of molasses and coarse grains', the act of swallowing itself, as well as its heaviness, its richness and darkness. The function of the flowers/bread opposition is clear enough in this context of insistent physicality; flowers are all but purely signal in the sense referred to by the baker, just like the almost purely symbolic, almost incorporeal wafers of the Mass. On one level then the opposition is again semiological, concerned not so

much with metaphysical significance but with the subversion of the semiological terms and mechanisms of 'metaphysical' signification itself.

The 'internalizing' of this subversion is not difficult to trace from these structural conflicts so subtly set in motion by Carver. Very simply, it can be argued that the bread figures not even as a self-contained figure in opposition, but, in its insistent physicality, primarily as a focus of a multiplicity of signal contradictions: that is, it becomes a *text*. Resisting the settlement of its 'competing' codes and significances, it becomes a site for a 'multiplicity of souls', a form of 'threshold' in Handke's sense; the nourishment it offers is in a fundamental sense a *narratological* sustenance. Its intra-textual narratives, derived from the surrounding ur-narrative of the teleology, create a locus of semiological engagement, of struggle (where we live, after all) that both figures and in itself embodies a textual *physics* of presence in the midst of a far more familiar and orthodox, but ultimately subverted, *metaphysics* of presence: Christian hope, identity ("I'm just a baker. I don't claim to be anything else"), the hope of a future, figured as children: 'He told them what it was like to be childless all these years. To repeat the days with the ovens endlessly full and endlessly empty'(p.351).

In 'A Small, Good Thing' we can indeed see a movement beyond even 'Will You Please Be Quiet, Please' and 'Cathedral' towards a 'redemption' of postmodern 'delinquency', but not through the figural sacralizing of metaphysical referents. Instead the movement is inwards, is deeper *into* the typological and figural interstices and resonances of narrative. It is finally by virtue of this increased semiological 'radicalism', not its abandonment for 'humanist' verities and myths of presence, that the text engages in a rich and complex way with the textuality, the 'fundamental narrative', of life itself, releasing the 'symbolic energy' of a restless expectancy in which 'every step, every gesture [may be] aware of itself as a potential threshold, and thus recreate what has been lost'.

This reading of Carver's work need not simply stop at 'A Small, Good Thing', of course, though this fiction is in many ways perhaps a culmination of strategies and more importantly 'obsessions' which so characterized his first three major collections.

With the publication of *Elephant* however, new narrative possibilities can be seen to emerge in the fictions, as if the struggles of 'A Small, Good Thing' had won a '*Lebensraum*' of sorts for the prose, releasing it from the all-but constant replaying of intransigent conflicts. The approach to this work is to be made in this study not directly from 'A Small, Good Thing' however. The struggle for an authentic adequate potency in the postmodern realist text has taken on several different forms, though certain fundamental correlations can be more or less consistently traced, allowing, for instance, the semiologically 'engaged' problematics of *In Country* or *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please* to stand comfortably, if distinctively, side by side with the far more explicitly reflexive *How German Is It*.

In studying the work of Richard Ford in relation to the postmodern framework already evolved for the fictions of Raymond Carver in this thesis, it is arguably possible to begin to identify at least the most significant of those fundamental connections and thereby undertake a speculative reading of more than just a discrete body of fiction - namely a reading of perhaps the most influential and transformative movement in American fiction since the postmodern upheaval itself began to be felt.

Despite the fact that any of several other equally important and representative writers (including Bobbie Ann Mason, Frederick Barthelme, Tobias Wolff) could be examined in almost as telling a way, Richard Ford has been chosen for the very basic but also very significant reason that, like Carver's, (though in his own often radically divergent ways and for his own quite distinctive ends) his methodology seems to reach back most directly and most rewardingly to the all-important 'Dead Father' of this new American realism, Hemingway.

## Notes to Chapter Two

- 1 For a full and very valuable discussion of postmodern 'naive narration' see Phillip Stevick, *Alternative Pleasures: Postrealist Fiction and the Tradition* (Urbana, 1981), pp.77-94.
- 2 James Mellard, *The Exploded Form: The Modernist Novel in America* (Urbana, 1980), p.20.
- 3 Ihab Hassan, *Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel* (Princeton, 1961), p.56.
- 4 See Carl Ficken, 'Point of View in the Nick Adams Stories', in *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway: Critical Essays*, edited by J.J. Benson (Durham, N. Carolina, 1975), pp.93-113 (p.95). Also see Elizabeth Wells, 'A Statistical Analysis of the Prose Style of Ernest Hemingway: Big Two-Hearted River', *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, pp.129-35.
- 5 W.C. Williams, *Selected Letters*, edited by J.C. Thirlwall (New York, 1957), p.297, quoted in Christopher Knight, 'William Carlos Williams, Paul Cézanne and the "Technique of Originality"', *Mosaic* 20, no.2 (1987), pp.83-96 (p.88).
- 6 Ernest Hemingway, 'The Killers', in *The First Forty-Five Stories* (London, 1962), p.231.
- 7 Marc Chenetier, 'Living On/Off the Reserve: Performance, Interrogation and Negativity in the Works of Raymond Carver', in *Critical Angles: European Views of Contemporary American Literature*, edited by Marc Chenetier (Carbondale, 1986), pp.164-90 (p.188).
- 8 'We...remain committed to and within the being of language, and can never step out of it and look at it from somewhere else', Martin Heidegger, *On The Way To Language*, translated by Peter Hertz (New York, 1971), p.134, quoted in Hilary Lawson, *Reflexivity: The Post-Modern Predicament* (London, 1985), p.84. See also Ludwig Wittgenstein's conception of language as 'forms of life', *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1953), Part IIxi, p.227.
- 9 Adam Mars-Jones, 'Words for the Walking Wounded: Review of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*', *TLS*, no. 4112 (1982) p.76.
- 10 'Living On/Off the Reserve', p.172.
- 11 'Living On/Off the Reserve', pp.173-4.
- 12 Ernest Hemingway, 'Big Two-Hearted River', in *The First Forty-Five Stories*, pp.178-9. All further references to this story in brackets after quotation.
- 13 Raymond Carver, 'Nobody Said Anything', in *The Stories of Raymond Carver* (London, 1985), pp.47-8. All further references in brackets after quotation.
- 14 Carl Ficken, 'Point of View in the Nick Adams Stories', *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, p.94.
- 15 Alfred Kazin, *Bright Book of Life: American Novelists and Storytellers from Hemingway to Mailer* (London, 1974), pp.14-15.

- 16 Raymond Carver, 'On Writing', *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories* (London, 1985), pp.24-5.
- 17 Charles Caramello, *Silverless Mirrors: Book, Self and Postmodern American Fiction* (Tallahassee, 1983), p.21.
- 18 *Bright Book of Life*, p.15.
- 19 *Bright Book of Life*, pp.19-20.
- 20 'Comic' in Schirato's structural sense, see Chapter One footnote no.47.
- 21 Lance Olsen, *Ellipse of Uncertainty: An Introduction to Postmodern Fantasy* (Westport, 1987), pp.107-8.
- 22 Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', in *Image, Music, Text: Essays*, selected and translated by Stephen Heath (London, 1984), p.158. See also *Philosophical Investigations*, Part 1, Sections 66-7, p.32.
- 23 'On Writing', p.27.
- 24 'Living On/Off the Reserve', pp.176-8.
- 25 Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (London, 1978), pp.228-9, quoted in 'Living On/Off the Reserve', p.181.
- 26 William Stull, Beyond Hopelessville: Another Side of Raymond Carver, *Philological Quarterly*, 64, no.1 (1985), pp.1-13 (p.2).
- 27 See Chenetier's reading of Carver's poem 'The Current', as well as his reference to Beckett in 'Living On/Off the Reserve', pp.185-6.
- 28 Alain Arias-Misson, 'Absent Talkers', *Partisan Review*, 49 (1982), pp.625-8 (p.628).
- 29 Charles Altieri, 'Wittgenstein on Consciousness and Language: A Challenge to Derridean Literary Theory', *Modern Language Notes*, 91 (1976), pp.1397-1423 (p.1422).
- 30 M.H. Abrams, 'The Deconstructive Angel', in *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Modernism Through Poststructuralism*, edited by Robert Con Davis (New York, 1986), pp.428-39 (p.439).
- 31 *Philosophical Investigations*, Part 1, Section 115, p.48.
- 32 Henry Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (Oxford, 1985), p.18.
- 33 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, edited by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1967), Section 393, p.70.
- 34 *Philosophical Investigations*, Part 1, Section 83, p.39 and Part 1, Section 266, p.94.
- 35 The notion of 'ordering' or policing, as it were, meaning, can be found throughout the *Investigations*. See for instance Part 1, Section 206, p.83.
- 36 Raymond Carver, 'Fires', in *Fires*, p.35.
- 37 Paul de Man, 'Semiotics and Rhetoric', in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, pp.467-80 (p.477).

- 38 'Absent Talkers', p.628.
- 39 *Wittgenstein and Derrida*, p.20.
- 40 'Semiology and Rhetoric', p.477.
- 41 David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips, 'Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?: Voyeurism, Dissociation and the Art of Raymond Carver', *Iowa Review*, 10, no.3 (1980), pp.75-90.
- 42 Boxer and Phillips, p.91.
- 43 Boxer and Phillips, p.75.
- 44 Boxer and Phillips, p.75.
- 45 Boxer and Phillips, pp.75-6.
- 46 Michael Gorra, 'Review of *Cathedral*', *Hudson Review*, 37, no.1 (1984), pp.155-9 (p.156).
- 47 See *Philosophical Investigations*, Part 1, Sections 67 and 83.
- 48 Raymond Carver, in Kasia Boddy, 'A Conversation: Interview with Raymond Carver', *London Review of Books*, 10, no.16 (1988), p.16.
- 49 'Fires', pp.35-6.
- 50 'Fires', pp.29-30.
- 51 Raymond Carver, 'Distance', *Fires*, p.131. Further references appear in text after quotation.
- 52 Raymond Carver, 'Everything Stuck to Him' *The Stories of Raymond Carver*, p.264.
- 53 Josh Rubins, 'Review of *Cathedral*', *New York Review of Books*, 30, no.18 (1983), pp.40-2 (p.42).
- 54 'Beyond Hopelessville', p.10. Further references in brackets after quotation.
- 55 *Gospel of Mark*, Chapter 15, Vs. 37.

**CHAPTER THREE**

**'BETWEEN THE IDEA AND THE ACT': IDEALITY, INDETERMINACY  
AND IDENTITY IN THE FICTION OF RICHARD FORD**

1

It can be argued that the 'luminous gestures' of Raymond Carver's fiction, heralding and indeed making possible a 'redemption', a non-metaphysical but vibrant re-sacralizing of delinquent postmodern signification, become in the novels and stories of Richard Ford a textual phenomena more complex again than those isolated 'epiphanic' potencies; that they form, in fact, a 'fabric' of epistemic self-orientation which is for their characters the guarantee of more than a brief, passing illumination and adequation. It is the constructing of this fabric, through an unravelling and re-working of codes of experience, that is at the heart of Ford's achievement.

This achievement is one which in many ways seems consonant with Carver's own undercutting of both Modernistic and traditional mimetic strategies. Ford too is arguably engaging in a by now familiar struggle to 'undo' both the 'mythic', subjectively centred Ideal self and the equally mythic chimera of 'objective' reality. Like Carver he works to re-locate and even re-validate the self *within* the texts that form its world since in a postmodern world (and Ford's fictional worlds are certainly that) this is where the 'realist' subject and voice as much as the metafictional subject and voice must begin.

In Ford's novels we see this process worked at (not through until *The Sportswriter*) in a variety of ways. It can be shown however that throughout all its different manifestations in the texts a basically continuous (though developing in terms of both structural and figural sophistication) process remains clearly to be seen: that of evolving an 'ontology of entry', of 'finding one's way about' (to echo Wittgenstein again) a deconstructed world (the perceived world - the world of self after all) whose texts of meaning and hence of validation for the subject have somehow lost their coherence and authority. This 'somehow' figures as many

things in the texts, but throughout retains a basic signifying value. Thus in Ford's first novel *A Piece of My Heart* it figures as both sexual obsession and a form of psychological aphasia; in *The Ultimate Good Luck* as the trauma of Vietnam and a State-and rebel-terrorized Oaxaca; in *The Sportswriter* the death of a son and the subsequent break up of a marriage; in *Wildlife* the separation of parents in a town threatened by forest fires. What all these things signify is epistemic breakdown, the 'undoing' or 'unravelling' referred to, an unravelling of the self's securities along the threads of its codes of meaning.

Of course this process in itself is not new to American fiction. Hemingway, pre-eminently for Ford, has been here before both in the 'undoing' of a 'lost generation' of his own and in the attempt to re-cohere the frayed realities of his heroes; in this sense Nick Adams and Frederic Henry are always at the shoulders of Ford's Quinn, Robard Hewes, Joe Brinson, even Frank Bascombe as essentially isolate, emotionally cauterized figures involved primarily in structuring rather than in simply empirically living their lives; the inevitable tension between these two modes of existence generating much of the lostness inevitably endured by his protagonists. In fact, like Carver's stories, Ford's novels can be seen as signalling a postmodern assimilation of Hemingway's Modernist transformation of classical realism. Just as earlier Hemingway's aesthetic provided for a reading of Carver's own postmodern response to the realist heritage, so now it can provide a Modernist 'foil' of sorts to Ford's explorations of the epistemic/ontological problematics raised by a postmodern fissuring of self-hood.

For Hemingway, writing in the wake of Conrad's, James' and Anderson's unreliable narrators the realist, metonymic text could no longer be taken for granted as a coded index of self-hood, of epistemic security, of, ultimately, a metaphysical, metatextual ontological *presence*. The realist voice, the given *narrative* presence could however still function, though no longer securely as the creator of rhetorical tropes, only as their creation. The voice could no longer guarantee a meta-textual authority (if it ever did even before that authority was

at last self-consciously and systematically challenged by the Moderns), but it could *itself* construct, or concretize, an ontological integrity of (as opposed to with) the text. The text functions for Hemingway not simply as a simple, complacent index of authorial, 'theological' security, but as a complex reconstruction, re-concretizing, of an insecure, subsiding reality. The textual index *becomes* the reality.

But for Ford, writing almost a century on, the text itself must be seen as shifting and friable. And if the text itself, because of the very nature of its materials, can never have a settled ontology even in its willed constructedness, what idea of self can survive on such unsupportive ground?

In his essay 'The Eccentric Self' Peter Currie notes that:

American postmodernism may be seen to endorse a rhetorical view of life which begins with the primacy of language. Richard Lanham's work on literary rhetoric in the Renaissance indirectly corroborates this distinguishing feature of Franco-American critical theory and postmodernist practice, particularly with regard to the question of character; for personality theory formed on the analogy of rhetorical theory exemplifies a typical Renaissance process, one which closely parallels Lacan on the relationship between figures of speech and the mechanisms of the unconscious: 'The parts of speech and the parts of man can be discussed with the same vocabulary'.<sup>1</sup>

What is particularly interesting about this claim with regard to the fiction of Richard Ford is that 'a rhetorical view of life which begins with the primacy of language' is not a 'distinguishing feature' of his postmodern practice at all, though it is certainly a feature of it. It is not a distinguishing feature since it applies equally well to certain modes of Modernist theory and practice, perhaps pre-eminently well to Hemingway.

This aesthetic has already been examined in the light of Carver's 'rhetorical view of life' of course, but this earlier comparison was concerned not with Modern/postmodern validations of self-hood as such, rather with the possibilities for a Modern/postmodern epistemic adequation; that is, with the self-as-other; other than the external world, its codes, its other selves. The analysis was in other words geared towards the epistemological potencies of the

two aesthetics. In studying Richard Ford's fiction the focus must be shifted from the epistemological, from the textual *phenomenology* of self-hood, to the ontological, to the textual *phenomena* of self-hood.

Returning to Peter Currie's observation, we can see that there are essentially two strands to Ford's implicit 'rhetorical view of life': the first a distinctively deconstructive process of, in Currie's words, 'effective negation and diffraction of the self, a transgression of the identity principle'<sup>2</sup>; the second, not mentioned in Currie's (predominantly metafiction orientated) essay, a thread trailing directly back to Hemingway, a thread of embattled self-construction. Both Nick Adams and Jake Barnes are, for instance, like Quinn in *The Ultimate Good Luck*, 'post-war' characters, characters who have experienced an incoherent war (whether the Great War or Vietnam) the aftermath of which has functioned as the engine of 'affective negation and diffraction of the self'. Furthermore, all three characters seek a re-unification of self through 'right action', through Quinn's 'Good Conduct'<sup>3</sup>, through the highly wrought shaping in action of consequent physical, emotional and moral experience. And so Nick Adams fishes, Jake Barnes is drawn to the bullfights and Quinn isolates himself as a winter gamekeeper in the Michigan forests.

The two 'strands' of Ford's working out of the dilemma of postmodern self-hood seem in one sense then hardly anything more than a simple continuation of broadly Modernist strategies. Arguably however Ford's concern with Modernistic ontological dialectics is as distinctively postmodern as Carver's concern with the Modernistic epistemologies discussed earlier, and the root of this distinction is to be located, as it was in the comparison of Hemingway and Carver, not simply in differences of emphasis or interpretation, but in a *subversion* of the parallels to be found.

For Hemingway, the impulse to forge a new, isolate validation may be seen as arising out of the classic, essentially tragic, and above all Ideal dialectic between a 'mythic' integrity of self and a 'political' deconstruction of that myth, the deconstructive axis in classical tragedy being the *hamartia*; the axis in

Hemingway being the post-war moral and cultural condition of a 'lost generation'.<sup>4</sup> For Ford this 'classic' dialectic holds good only within the context of another, larger problematic which subsumes the former, though common to Ford's first two novels in particular is a framework which corresponds to the Modernistic frame erected by Hemingway, a framework which must first be delineated before the undermining of it can be posited and appreciated.

Just as Nick Adams and Jake Barnes work out (though never fully resolve) a mode of being caught between the centrifugal dynamic of the acted-upon self (moulded, disfigured, castrated by war) and the centripetal dynamic of the self-as-actor-upon (the figure of the hunter-fisherman, the meticulous, sacramental coherer-through-right-action of the external, potentially chaotic physical world), so in *A Piece of My Heart* Sam Newel realizes that: "Everything I think I know is ambiguous...I'm flying apart a mile a millisecond for that very reason"<sup>5</sup> and Robard Hewes is unable to resist the 'centrifugal' force of his lust for Beuna, a force which dissociates choice, the 'cement' of self, from act:

It seemed unaccountable, he thought, for life to transport you this way, to where you'd never thought of going nor wanted to go nor even knew to exist. It made him feel giddy and out of control...there wasn't any planning it finally. He saw it all at once. It was all right to plot it, but you had to be ready to glide in the wake of fate sooner or later, and not be surprized when things surprized you.(p.200)

*A Piece of My Heart* is essentially a chronicle of the futile attempts of both men to understand and overcome this 'transgression of the identity principle', the characteristic Hemingwayesque struggle, though Ford is less shy of allowing his characters to articulate as well as live it.

Even in Ford's far mellower *The Sportswriter* the same dialectical pressures can be identified quite easily, though now more understated and self-contained: Frank Bascombe turns to sportswriting after a brief period as a 'serious' writer because the certainties of the sportswriting code, its ethos of a stoic but 'homespun' 'right action' (as well as its regular pay) offers a more secure textual validation of his life than the contrivances of fiction; after his son's death and his

divorce it becomes the means of 'a separate peace', the willed haven from a fragmenting world.

How then are these parallels with Modernistic dialectical strategies of validation, seemingly mirrored so closely, subverted by Ford, and to what end?

To begin with, a crucial distinction must be made between the (broadly speaking) Modernistic 'deconstructive turn' functioning as an 'essential', or classically 'tragical' *axis* and the postmodern deconstructive *principle*, functioning not tragically, but ironically, even 'comically'; that is, functioning as a structurally inherent compromising of the codes of right action, rather than simply as the critical aporia which prompts, even necessitates, the re-codifying of experience.<sup>6</sup> Instead of the rhetorical re-shaping occurring as a stabilizing, potentially totalizing strategy then as it is for the Moderns, the re-codifying in Ford's fiction remains determinedly rhetorical and never 'hardens' into an 'essential' grammar, into myth. Rather the encoded 'shelters' of ontological security constructed by Ford's characters are always revealed as reactionary and as such inherently baseless, deriving their authority not from any true integrity of being, but from a transitory, embattled discipline of being. For Hemingway in such texts as 'Big Two-Hearted River' an Ideal dialectic of ontological security can be cleanly played out between the disruptive forces of the external world and the implicitly *a priori* cohering potency of the mind in action, of the will as existential function; for Ford, as will be shown presently, such dialectics are simply strategic and transitive, a means of marshalling a 'multiplicity of souls' to return to Staten's phraseology, a crisis strategy which cannot be sustained indefinitely against the centrifugal pressure of an *a priori* 'multiplicity' which in its rhetorical lack of fixity undermines from the beginning what must now be seen as the *arbitrary*, imposed grammar of the 'code'. Again then, the tragical axis still available to the Moderns disappears and in its place is an ontology with no room for even problematic, traumatized 'essences' beneath the storm; instead,

The rhetorical view of life, in Lanham's definition, is satirical because the rhetorical stylist can see no central self or irreducible identity to be true to: 'the concept of a central self, true or not, the

idea of an unreduced residue rather than a candid acknowledgement of the rhetorical aspects of life, flatters man immensely'.<sup>7</sup>

The distinction can perhaps be seen then as an outworking of the dynamic traced in the previous chapter away from an 'essentialist' view of being. For the Moderns this essentialism is more or less taken for granted and allows for at least the classic 'tragical' or mythical valorising of the self; in a postmodern context it survives as the 'straw essence' necessary for the Derridean notion of 'polluted' or 'compromized' being where the subject is seen primarily as a wholly vulnerable chimera, open to an endless 'unravelling' of integrity in much the same way that the postmodern text is open to an endless unravelling of its codes and structures of grammatical authority.

Ford moves even further away from it than this however, towards what may be termed an exploration of 'transitive' being, no longer *polluted* by *différance*, since the very notion of pollution presupposes an essentialist nostalgia, but rather *released* into *différance*, into a rhetoric of life which is 'potentially catastrophic' in de Man's words,<sup>8</sup> but by the same token potentially transformative. As Currie again puts it, a "non-linear" conception of character has so far emerged, constructed on a set of *transformations* rather than the consistency of an "evolving" or "developing" personality<sup>9</sup>(Italics mine). Arguably Ford's characters play out just such a conceptual drama of character, of self-hood; again, not a tragic drama since the ontological flaw is not a fateful axis but a mundane condition of being; rather an ironic/satiric 'comedy'. When Sam Newel in *A Piece of My Heart* is describing his father's life (the 'adhesive for everything' Newel finds incoherent in life) to his lover Beebe, this sense of the bleak comedy of an existence undermined by the ever-present trivial (rather than the one tragic) nexus (perhaps pointedly his father misses the Second World War because of a heart murmur - "I don't know what would have happened to him. Nothing worse, I guess") is never far from the surface. "Does that seem at all funny?" Newel asks, explaining "it began to seem funny again to me for a second"(p.81). His father's death too is, in Newel's words "practically slapstick":

'He got killed in Bastrop, Louisiana, on his way to New Orleans. He got behind a big flat-haul and I guess he was going to pass, I don't know. He was a traveling salesman and never drove over sixty, never got close behind cars. But he was behind this truck for some reason, and all of a sudden a load of corrugated steel pipe came loose and slid off down in the front seat with him. Cut his head off. Left him sitting in the front seat. He could've kept on driving if he'd had a head. It didn't even bump the compass on the dash.'(p.77)

Of course this 'comic' probing and undermining of the Modernistic, isolate constructed self is not systematically pursued in Ford's work, though in the first two novels that subversion is the dominant feature of his engagement with the problem of postmodern self-hood. By the third, *The Sportswriter*, the constructed self has all but collapsed before the novel begins and the tentative reconstructions of 'transitive being' form the novel itself. *A Piece of My Heart* and *The Ultimate Good Luck* can therefore perhaps be most usefully approached as being themselves transitive in their explorations, working towards a re-adequation, but characteristically through a pervasive deconstruction, neither novel ever settling but keeping their characters and problematics always at one remove from re-orientation and resolution, each textually mirroring, then, the ontological restlessness that above all else concerns them.

Significantly, restlessness is the main structural principle of Ford's debut novel *A Piece of My Heart*. In charting the journeys of Sam Newel and Robard Hewes across America to a remote island on the Mississippi Ford interweaves two accounts of chronic restlessness, constructing from them not a dialectic but an oppositional structure itself animated by unease, by an antagonistic refusal to fulfill its tropological dynamics of resolution. The novel opens with the death of one of the two men, though we are left uncertain as to which of them it is, and this fact wholly undercuts the superficially dialectical structure of the novel, subverting structural expectations, creating a dis-ease that permeates any latent sense of dynamic progression, forcing the structure out into diffusion rather than in towards resolution. Indeed, as if to make the fact of this textual restlessness more clear Ford takes the title for the novel (itself indicating fragmentation of

the heart, the mythic centre of the self) not from any cohering significance in or of the narrative, but from the writing on the side of a truck which passes through the text without leaving any mark other than this signal of only transitional illusions of meaningfulness and coherence, glimpsed 'through dust and coagulated grease', hinting at but not finally delivering 'good sense'. Semantic 'restlessness' or instability is here also figuring alongside and underneath the marked structural and thematic resistance to fixedness, then:

The first truck to pass the station hissed through the curves and ground out into the road - a tandem hauling diesel smoke into the desert. There was large writing on the sides through dust and coagulated grease, WHACK MY OLD DOODLE, and below that, TAKE ANOTHER LITTLE PIECE OF MY HEART, as though one line followed on the other and made good sense. He looked at the writing and scratched the back of his neck and wondered what that meant.(p.30)

The overwhelming impression left by the two searches for re-orientation undertaken by Robard Hewes and Newel is one of a fundamentally aimless, transitional 'passing through' rather than any Modernistic 'odyssey' towards however ironic a conclusion. As Hewes reflects as he begins his journey: 'nothing in his life *ever* ended. Things only changed and grew up into something else'(p.12). Hewes and Newel are anything but Ulysses's; more ontological travelling salesmen, as it were, never reaching a point of rest, always in transit, undergoing a condition of life, not undertaking a journey to any fixed goal.

Certainly, to return to the account of Newel's father, the figure of the travelling salesman is invested with a great deal of significance by Ford. "My father", Newel admits,

'isn't finally important. He's just adhesive for everything. I puzzle about him to have somebody to puzzle about. But I still end up thinking about just parts all the time. There's something easy about them I don't understand, and I can't hold them together well enough to figure out what it is.'(p.80)

It is not Newel's father as such then, not the man that's important; rather the legacy of the *figure* of the extended trope of his life as it presents itself to Newel's memory. The significance is in the structural principle of that life (one of transition and fragmentation) a principle that now structures (or rather de-

structures) Newel's inner life and figures as a metaphor almost for his lack of settled identity, of coherent being. Newel can only 'think in parts', parts which cannot be made coherent because he has no stronger 'adhesive', no stronger 'identity principle' of his own to replace the identity of his father. Thus through the novel we are presented with a series of vignettes, scenes from Newel's past, scenes of life on the road with his father, none of which cohere or reveal but only constitute a series of ironic non-epiphanies. What we see is a postmodern process of *metonymic*, even aphasic identity construction, essentially arbitrary and contingent for all its teasing towards synthetic meaningfulness. These passages are italicized as if to emphasise their separateness from the rest of the text, from anything consequential, leaving them irreducible and finally opaque. In typical postmodern fashion they are, as far as Newel's identity is concerned, mirrors not windows, and this is the root of his inability to make the fragments produce meaning, and the root of his restlessness which is simply an expression of his fear that in the end there are no windows on the soul, only a hall of mirrors at the end of 'self-discovery':

'...what does it have to do with you?' 'It frightens the shit out of me.' He tried to make out a look on her face but couldn't. 'I don't *want* everything the same. Your past is supposed to give you some way of judging things. So it has to do with me because I say it does.'

'There's no need answering you,' she said.

'Shouldn't I have *something* besides the assurance that everything will eventually be the same?'(pp.82-3)

Newel's 'epiphanies', then, *reflect* an acted upon (because helpless, or impotent in self-definition) identity rather than *reveal* the interstices of motive and impulse. Just as the travels of the salesman-figure of his father are 'handed down', are scheduled and not chosen, are separate from any personal motive for travel, so Newel's loss of 'security of being' and consequent restlessness is a state of being, figuring an ontological flux and not an existential journey of self-discovery, though this is what he yearns to make it. 'It has to do with [him] only because [he] say[s] it does'; the significances, the 'epiphanies' are arbitrary, or at

best beyond comprehension. His adhesive is not the Hemingwayesque, Ideal sacralizing power of the will, but mere wilfulness.

Robard Hewes also suffers this same disjunction between a propelling restlessness and the lack of an 'adhesive' strong enough to bind that restlessness into a coherent focus. Instead of the will his 'adhesive' is his obsession with his cousin Beuna, and this is enough to pull him away from the weaker bond of his marriage. Again then we see character delineated according to principles of fragmentation as opposed to an "evolving" or "developing" personality':

On the road back across the desert he began to try to settle things. In general, he knew, things didn't end in your life because by all sensible estimations they *ought* to. Or because people involved did things or changed places that would ordinarily make carrying on any longer a natural hardship. Because once a force got a start in you, it grew and took on dimensions and shadings and a life separate and sometimes as complete and good as your own.(p.11)

Of course behind such a dissociation of self from being in the existential sense of initiating, choosing and acting out of an integrity of identity, an authenticity, is a fundamental dissociation of identity itself. The dislocation from the past and hence from understanding felt by Newel and the dislocation from the acting present felt by Hewes signifies an ontological disruption, a disruption seen not only in the self-explanations of the characters, but also, as the novel takes on an almost archetypal landscape (the island) for its action, in an analysis of the dramatic 'siting' of the physical/psychological outworking of the narrative. In this analysis another important dimension of Ford's handling of the problem of postmodern identity in the novel can, arguably, be seen: a dimension which seeks to make an ironic, even parodic, archetype of the novel's dramatized ontological concerns.

The notion of an island or even just isolated locus serving as the basis for what could be called an ontological topography is of course an old one. Poe's Valley of the Many-Coloured Grass, Coleridge's Xanadu, Lord Jim's Patusan and Marlow's Congo, Nick Adams' camp on the Big Two-Hearted River and of course Prospero's island all belong to some extent within this loose 'tradition'.

Ford's island however, while clearly designed to echo and even promise just such a depth of signification, both fulfills and simultaneously subverts it as a (carefully manipulated in true postmodern spirit) tropic expectation.<sup>10</sup>

We first hear of the island through Newel's lover, Beebe, the granddaughter of the island's owner, Mr Lamb, and it is unambiguously, if laconically, held out to him from the start as a place of potential reorientation:

'...I don't know what you're talking about,' she said.

'It's complicated,' he said, feeling sad.

'Go to the island,' she said cheerfully, as if that had been an acceptable option all along, and she were just rehearsing it for the record.

'And do *what?*' he said irritably. 'Run through the woods screaming while they shoot at me?'

'I don't know what,' she said. 'But there isn't anyplace left for you to figure out whatever it is you seem jinxed into figuring out, all that dismal mess you were shrieking about...It's a very good place to go to compose yourself, or do whatever you'd like.'

It's Mississippi in its most baronial and ridiculous. You can go tonight if you want to; all I have to do is make a call to the boat camp...

'...I'll tell Popo you're coming but he shouldn't expect you until he sees you. That'll be nice.'

'Nice for whom? Why don't you just say I'm presently in an institution for the morally unsure and won't be released for some time?'(pp.83-4)

Immediately however Ford undercuts this promise of 'composure', of reconstruction, subverting the expectations of a secure 'haven' he has set up through Beebe's account of the island:

'Did you know,' she said, looking abstracted, 'in 1911, some poor people went to sleep in Arkansas and woke up in Mississippi. The river changed course at 3 A.M. and everyone was forced to make some adjustments. Popo's coloured man insists he was in the river in a wood boat at the moment of the change, but I don't believe it.'(pp.84-5)

Just as Ford can be seen as both adopting and undercutting the Modernist valorizations of the male, isolate, ordering self in structuring the events in Hewes' and Newel's worlds solidly around inner pathologies which, instead of re-cohering, fragment and dissociate, so he can also be seen as both adopting and undermining a much older technique for the fictional valorization of identity as a cohesive, cohering and centring force, as an Idealistic 'gravity' for a world of signs. The island is set up as a signal for resolution and healing, but then this

sign is 'polluted', its significations compromised. Significantly, the first thing Newel and Hewes discover on arrival is that the water supply has become soiled by a fault in Lamb's sewerage system:

'Shit,' the old man said. 'There's shit in my well water, by God. Mrs Lamb knows what she's talking about.'

The colored man shook his head ruefully and stood over the hole, staring at it as if it were a grave.

'I bragged on it,' the old man said, still levered back on his haunches.

'Yes suh,' the colored man said.

'It queers everything. I told Gaspereau a month ago what a goddamn good well I had, been good since 1922, and the first thing I know the privy goes and infects it. That was a jinx, and I'm to cause.'(p.110)

If the island itself carries a weight of albeit ironic figural significance, Lamb himself certainly functions as an ironic/parodic cantankerous Prospero figure: from his claim that 'that was a jinx and I'm to cause' to his engineering the removal of his island from official maps, (thus in a representational sense making the island his own, decontextualized, private creation) he emerges as the comic-grotesque master of a wryly conceived, postmodern version of a *Tempest*-like Idealist landscape. We learn that the animal life he has charge over on the island becomes subject to whim rather than natural laws (hunting laws being framed around the natural order of breeding seasons of course):

'I thought you said it was out of season for deer,' he said.

The old man looked at him malignantly. 'It's *my* land. It's open season on anything I take a notion to shoot. Piss on deer season and every other season. I'll shoot what I want to shoot. I got a covey of pet quail right out between the house and my airfield this very minute...I'll take Elinor and walk right out there and shoot me two quails and eat them for dinner, if I want to. I don't need nobody to tell me it ain't quail season, cause it *is*. Them quails is always in season - *my* season.'(p.130)

And equally Prospero-like within the parodic context of the comparison is his attitude to Hewes and Newel, his psychological/ontological castaways: "'I don't like people around here who aren't satisfied, except me, and I can be any goddamned thing I please'"(p.115).

And again echoing (within Ford's 'realistic' parameters) Shakespeare's island, the very physicality of Lamb's self-contained world is ambiguous:

With one hand to guard his eyes, he poked into the grove, which seemed to be beech saplings and plum bush, until in front of him he could no longer see how the trail parted the brush, and he could smell the sweet plums, and his next step was a long one down into the water.(p.184)

Again there are elliptical echoes and hints at a restoration for Hewes and Newel, echoes and hints that draw on an almost archetypal textual strategy for such a restoration. When Ford undermines these already tenuous significances therefore he is doing more than arbitrarily depriving Newel, Hewes and the reader of a satisfying, 'readerly' closure. In a sense he is subverting a whole tropological tradition of the Idealist power of the will to re-mould in perception (and hence creation) the past and acting present, inverting this classical and Modernistic metaphoric ontology of the text and presenting us instead with a metonymic ontology of lost origins and centres, of contingent fragments 'shored up against the ruins'. And so we see Lamb progressively become an ever more inverted, desacralized Prospero (we discover that his island is in fact leased, not owned), and find the novel steadily charting his decline:

'I just don't know,' the old man said, jamming his little hands together and starting one thumb into orbit around the other, becoming momentarily engrossed as though it was no small task to keep them both going at once. 'First my well goes queer, which it had never been known to do in fifty years. Then the turkey season fouls up, then the goddamn lease is coming up.' The old man squinted at him as if he were considering including him as a fourth calamity. 'There's something wrong, ain't it, Newel?'(p.168)

Not surprisingly, then, Hewes and Newel, so overtly brought together by the novel's contrapuntal structure, only once during their stay make any attempt to understand each other's reasons for being there, and even then the attempt ends not in resolution or enlightenment, but in a series of phatic exchanges laced with a sardonic irony (*'as if* he really wanted to know the answer', *'as if* he were looking at everything philosophically') targeted at precisely those tropological, 'readerly', metaphoric expectations mentioned previously:

The jeep motor choked out and Robard watched the lake stippling light up through the willows. 'I got something I want to ask *you*, Newel,' he said...'What is it *you're* doing down here?' Robard pushed his thumb knuckle in his eye socket and gave his eye a good kneading.

'I'm forgetting all about that,' he said, and got up and stood around to the front of the jeep, feeling ready to go back.

'Life ain't *that* difficult.' Robard took a match from behind his ear and scratched it off his zipper.

'I just have to adopt a plainer view of things,' he said.

'That's me.' Robard puffed luxuriously.

'I had all these ideas I couldn't make sense of.' He came and slid over onto the back bench of the jeep and let his feet dangle. 'Peoples names, a lot of things at random.'

'But ain't that just your memory?' Robard said.

'Yeah, but it started giving me the creeps! I couldn't remember anything else, except what had happened the day before, and some little bits of law school. Didn't that ever happen to you?'

'No,' Robard said, touching the ash with the nail of his little finger. 'I ain't been to law school.'

He frowned at Robard, who was admiring his cigarette. 'Anyway, goddamn it, I got obsessed with what the hell I knew, and all I knew was just those things - bits of time, pictures of people in my mind, little places, my old man. You can't attach yourself to a bunch of crap like that. I sat in my apartment a solid month trying to stitch it together into some reasonable train of thought, and none of it worked.'

'How come?' Robard said, turning around as if he really wanted to know the answer.

'I don't know...'

...Robard sighed as if he were looking at everything philosophically. 'All right,' he said...

'You come all the way down here and you're going back without having done nothin?'

He tapped his heels, watching the dust settle on the grass. 'I figured one thing out,' he said.

'And who's that - me?' Robard said.

'I don't give a shit anymore,' he said precisely, listening to the air wash up through the willows.(pp.228-9)

An even more telling, though much briefer, encounter between the two men has yet to occur however, and when it does it is placed significantly within the context of what must be seen as the structural heart of the novel's subversion of its tropic archetypalism - Newel and Lamb's fishing trip. If, as has been argued, the island can be seen as an undermining, a postmodern desacralizing of traditional ontological topographies, sites of Idealistic valorizations and restorations of integrated self-hood, then the fishing trip can be seen as bringing not only this tropic subversion to a head, but also as a consequence the failure of its visitants to achieve the restoration the tropological dynamic in question promises.

Parallels have already been drawn between Hemingway's Modernist valorizing of the isolate self, personal 'codes' of right action and Ford's adoption and undercutting of very similar figures of self-validation. In the episode of the

fishing trip a more specific parallel is worked out between Hemingway's use of the isolated, sacralized (through the will's rituals in hunting and fishing) landscape as an ontological significance and Ford's 'debasement' of such significances in the episode in question.<sup>11</sup> In place of Nick Adams' artistry with the fly-rod for instance we get:

'What about poles?' he said, looking wretchedly toward the underside of the house, where the poles were strung...

...'Shit on poles,' the old man shouted, careening off toward the outhouse, getting both hands on either side of the wheel and seeming to lose control...

...'I like to telephone the fish,' the old man said craftily, and motioned with his thumb to the back of the jeep at a little black metal box with a smooth wood-handled crank and two long half-stripped copper leads fastened to gold thumbscrews at either end.(p.236)

Nowhere in the novel is it made more clear that the psychological 'lostness' and separateness felt by Newel and Hewes is irredeemable not simply because they 'don't give a shit anymore' but because such capitulations are ultimately grounded in an ontological condition of subversion, a disruption which offers parodies of significance rather than settling for affirmations of limited significances and which thereby challenges rather than simply avoids the tenuous securities accreting to Modernistic valorizations of the (however fluid) essential self. It is this undermining, parodic quality that is both the main structural and aesthetic determinant in the book, and that should arguably be taken as its final word on the 'teasing' dialectical structural devices that simultaneously invest with and divest of settled, valorizing significance the characters and their meeting in such a tropologically de-stabilized fictional world. As Newel is driven past Hewes on the way to the lake then, we are made to feel that this is a very significant non-meeting, perhaps Newel and Hewes' last chance to fulfill the expectations set up by their being brought together on the island, and yet we are also told that Newel's sudden sense of urgent importance is nothing more than an 'insignificant urge':

The jeep ducked below the rim of the bank, and he looked back disconsolately at the house and saw Robard kneeling out in the dooryard to the Gin Den...He had a feeling that when he got back from wherever he was going, some inexplicable place where

you caught fish by telephone, Robard would be long gone, and it made him feel queer and almost angry. And he had the sudden insignificant urge to signal him somehow, to wave his hand up, but the jeep straggled down beneath the flat marly rim of the buff, and he was gone, and there was no time even to get his hand off the frame of the glass and into the air.(p.236)

This 'doubleness' in the signifying process continues as Newel and Lamb drive to the lake, Ford's depiction of Lamb and his gestures alternating between the mysteriously portentous and the pathetically impotent and (so far as the Prospero parallel is concerned) debased:

All at once the old man hacked up a pocket of phlegm and spat it and gave him a tricky look as if something were tempting him to speak but he was intent on keeping it a secret until precisely the right moment when he'd spring it and startle everybody,

Ford tells us, but just preceding this information is a description of Lamb which paints him as not just 'debilitated', but by the end of the passage all but physically absent, completely wasted away, prefiguring his actual and ultimate absence in death which is soon to follow:

The jeep was producing a lot of smoke and terrible strangling sounds that filled the bottom, and Mr Lamb had retreated into the clamor and begun to look a little debilitated. In the mossy light his skin was pale and the blood pounded the artery in his forehead, percolating hotly back into his brain. His frame was bent over the wheel and his suspenders had luffed forward away from his chest as if nothing were inside them to hold on to.(p.237)

Ford goes on to further set up and then undermine several more intimations of unspoken knowledge, of epistemic potency, for instance by 'loading' Lamb's sighting of a woodpecker ('Mr Lamb watched the bird keenly, as if he were making a mental note of it, then glanced at him again craftily as though there had been some import to the bird's flying the way it had that shouldn't have been missed') and then following it immediately with 'the story of the slaughterhouse goat', a long, rambling, 'debased' parable with a leaden dénouement which Ford again parodically invests with a (this time overtly subverted) promise of significance:

'Oh, yeah,' the old man said, the smile reviving. 'So what do you think the morale of that story is about the goat named Newel?'

'I don't know,' he said gloomily, resenting the old man for the whole story.

'The morale is,' Mr Lamb said, transforming his eyes into tiny peepholes of unrivaled significance, 'a smart goat will always

outrun a dead one.' The old man's eyes suddenly snapped wide open, in imitation of the response he expected to see but didn't get.(p.241)

A little further on we find Lamb sitting and watching the bank of the lake (much as the reader is by now presumably sitting and watching the text) 'as if he were waiting for something to identify itself and deliver up a potent sign'(p.242). Once again however the anticipation of significance is harnessed, as indeed it is throughout this whole passage, to the limiting, puncturing formula accompanying it: 'as if/'as though'.

This pattern of valorization/subversion reaches far beyond this adjectival oscillation of course. In an important sense the episode of the fishing trip functions not so much as the static heart or centre of the book, but rather as a dynamic nexus. It is the point at which the novel's doubleness finally asserts itself, splitting on a thematic level the fates of Newel and Hewes, and on a figural level the metonymic, fragmented postmodern ennui from its archetypal, quasi-mythopoeic, Modernistic shadow.

Thus the lake, like the island, is an 'absent presence', deprived of a solid signal reality, an ambiguous non-place *within* an ambiguous non-place:<sup>12</sup>

He tried to recall if he had seen evidence of a lake on the aerial map, but could only remember the contour of the island, a large blotchy teardrop imprint, bounded by the river, but nothing else. It seemed possible that the picture had been taken when the lake was dry and the ground mossed over, though it seemed equally feasible that the old man had schemed and cajoled and managed to delete the lake from the picture by design, the same way he had scourged the entire island from the official map of the Corps of Engineers.(p.243)

Now however there are no hints at, or echoes of, a sacralized topography or a sacralizing wedding of the will to the world through physical ritual. There is only a straightforwardly parodic debasing of that trope where, correspondingly, the mechanized, skill-less 'ritual' enacted 'splits' the act of fishing from its tropic resonances. Indeed, any way of taking fish other than by electrocution is incomprehensible to Lamb:

'I'll tell you, though,' he said, smiling strangely, 'Landroo's a comical old coon. When he comes out here, he won't go right to where them jugs are at. He'll rig him up a cane pole and take a bunch of whatever he likes that day, worms or roaches or

whatever's he got in his "farm", and start down there in them dead falls and nigger all the way up to here.' The old man grinned at him in amazement as if Landrieu were a living mystery to match all mysteries, never divining Landrieu might take some considerable pleasure in the leisurely divertissement of fishing, before he got down to the actual business of taking in the fish.(p.246)

The one and only 'event' that takes place on the island therefore, far from fulfilling the tropic expectations discussed earlier, completely overturns them. The fishing expedition effectively 'concludes' the novel (from here on there is little 'structuring' of expectation, just a coda of disintegration) simply because it is here that 'doubleness' becomes 'otherness'. The parodic ceases to function as a corrective and becomes the dominant mode, amplifying both the 'restlessness' and essential separate-ness which above all else the novel ultimately insists on. Lamb's 'practically slapstick' death is inevitable on this fishing trip, its comic-grotesque quality catapulting Lamb's figural significance finally and unequivocally from the ironic to the parodic, the one conclusive dynamic of the novel as a whole:

All at once Mr Lamb stopped cranking, his ears grown scarlet, and sweat thickening the collar of his flannel shirt. The old man turned and gave him a defiant look, then grabbed for the wires in his other hand...by some miscalculation he grabbed onto both spiky ends at once and discharged the entire stored-up quotient of telephonic electricity directly into his body.

'Oops,' the old man said in an obvious surprise, and threw up both his hands, dropping the cords into the water and pitching straight over backward into the middle of the boat, making a loud whumping sound on the chinky curvature of his spine, his eyes wide open as if he were about to instigate another imitation of Landrieu but had somehow gotten sidetracked. He did not hit his head. The rocker effect of his spinal curve mediated the blow so that his head only lightly touched the slatted bottom of the boat the way an acrobat's head passingly touches the mat at the start of a somersault.(p.249)

Equally inevitable is the conclusion of Hewes's and Newel's attempts to understand each other, and by extension the roots of their restlessness and dissolution of identity, their 'spiritual', ontological brokenness, a dimension to their suffering shaded in by Ford behind their nervous, dismissive talk of eyes, the 'windows of the soul', and broken hearts:

He looked at Newel, then thought a moment. 'What was it you said about my eyes? Something ignorant, I remember.'

'I forgot,' Newel said, looking away.

'No you didn't neither,' he said. He bit up a tiny piece of his lip.

'You gettin worried?' Newel smiled at him.

'Screw yourself,' he said, and stalked inside the Gin Den and let the door spring out in the wind. He sat on the edge of the bed and watched Newel through the open door and wished he'd never seen him.

Newel walked inside the doorway and leaned against the jamb and looked out. 'I said there was something grieved about you.' The wind had begun to keen in the joints, and the tin seemed to expand as if it wanted to explode. 'Grieved might not be the right word,' Newel said, wagging the back of his head against the chase. 'Heartbroken might be.'

'Nothin ain't broke my heart,' he said, staring at the points of his boots, wishing Newel would disappear.

'I don't know,' Newel said. 'You know more about it than I do.' He walked off from the doorway.

'I sure as hell do,' he said loudly, trying to decipher just what there could be to break his heart.(p.262-3)

## 2

If the figural 'key' to the theme of self-hood in *A Piece of My Heart* is restlessness, then the 'key' of *The Ultimate Good Luck* is, as its title suggests, luck, and the two are in fact intricately related in almost all of Ford's later work. In this second novel however there is little emphasis on restlessness as such: it is almost as if these two early novels work out two separate figural strategies in preparation for the mature work which, in bringing them intimately together, creates a richer, more complex strategy for moving beyond the mapping out of the postmodern, continually deconstructed self's fragmentation and lostness.

Having said this, luck is of course a factor in the structuring of *A Piece of My Heart*, functioning both as an arbitrary '*deus ex machina*' (the deaths in the novel are all 'bad luck', from Lamb's accidental electrocution to Hewes' misfortune in falling victim to the teenage psychopath employed by Gaspereau at the boat camp) and as portent (experience for Hewes especially seems often patterned by omen rather than rational, causal inference - seeing a rabbit in a cage 'a tiny vein of panic' opens in him, and when he realizes he has inadvertently left Lamb's revolver in his belt on entering the house he is again panicked by the seemingly inconsequentially accidental, rushing out to the Gin Den and determining that 'you had to be ready to glide in the wake of fate sooner or later, and not be

surprized when things surprized you'). The use of luck, whether as 'machinery' in the plot or as portent is very undeveloped in comparison with Ford's later work however, functioning as a backdrop to the psychological/ontological drama, not, as in subsequent fictions, figuring within it.

In moving from the treatment of luck in this first novel to the far more explicitly articulated, figurally 'loaded' use of luck in the second, it is useful to first consider some of the ways in which Ford develops the signal 'weighting' of the term in stories roughly contemporary with the first two novels. For instance, in 'Going to the Dogs', the earliest story in Ford's collection *Rock Springs*, we see an ostensibly very simple, but in fact quite complex, layering of significance regarding the notion of luck. The narrative opens with two references to luck, one explicit, one implicit:

My wife had just gone out West with a groom from the local dog track, and I was waiting around the house for things to clear up, thinking about catching the train to Florida to change my luck. I already had my ticket in my pocket.<sup>13</sup>

Luck immediately figures as a twofold contextualization of the narrative then, siting the 'drama' in a textual world where the traditional devices for advancing such a narrative, for opening or closing the text, for a moral 'sacralizing' of the drama, are absent. These absent devices may be broadly grouped under two categories, the use of choice and the use of fate as primary structural determinants. Choice and an arbitrary fate exist in this story, but they are not oppositional, and so nothing *hinges* on them; fate is not defied and choice is not overwhelmed. Instead the determinant is luck - the interface of choice and fate. In 'Going to the Dogs' (the title itself of course punningly conflates the notions of gambling/luck with self-ruin) Ford begins to show that these distinctions are not trivial hair-splitting, that the elements of a distinctive aesthetic of textual self-hood rest on it.

To return to the opening paragraph - luck is both the background to the narrative (the narrator loses his wife at the greyhound races and this loss is the occasion for his narrative) and, figuring as the possibilities for a new life in

Florida, the fulcrum around which the narrated drama turns; is therefore both problem and projected solution. In other words we are presented from the start with a foregrounding not of character, but of a context, just as at the opening of *A Piece of My Heart* where we are presented with a dramatic context for the rest of the book which subjugates the significances of character to the all-embracing single significance of inevitable disaster. At a stroke Ford has dissociated the narrating 'I' from its own discourse; the discourse of the story is now primarily a structural discourse - the 'I' degenerates from subject to object, becomes passive, concretized only in relation to structural circumstance. The narrator 'goes to the dogs' in a double sense: under his story of his wife's desertion and his consequent decline lies a more fundamental abandonment of character for context, self for the interstices of a purely reactive code of understanding and perception. This underlying sense is hinted at by Ford in his naming of the character:

'I don't even know your name,' Bonnie said, and stood up and looked around the sad little room for the door to the back.  
'Henderson,' I lied. 'Lloyd Henderson is my name. I've lived here six months.' I stood up.(p.115)

The name he gives, the identity, the self he adopts is an arbitrary response, the self is 'created' through a reactive self-definition.

Structurally this dissociating of the 'I' as voice from the centring, centred self of classical (and indeed in more formally varied ways much Modernist) realist fiction becomes clearest at the very end of the story. The actual word 'luck' occurs for only the second time in the very last sentence, despite the notion of luck permeating the narrative (discussions of betting at the dogs given resonance by the first paragraph), and the effect of this limited repetition, functioning almost as a *dénouement*, is to foreground radically both word and concept, again at the expense of character-as-actor; the 'I' is marginalized in its own discourse, passive and impotent before the 'luck' which has crippled the one choice, the one determination made available to it by Ford, the choice to leave:

But when I went to the dinette to have a look at my ticket in my wallet, there was nothing but some change and some matchbooks, and I realized it was only the beginning of bad luck.(p.118)

An ambiguous relationship has thus been set up; on the one hand the human significances of the women who visit the narrator after hunting are centralized by the narrative 'I', their visit is, after all, the 'subject' of the story; on the other hand they can be seen to have functioned at the last as little more than *deus ex machina*, Ford's agents of 'bad luck', their actions contained and defined by the two poles of bad luck which stand at either side of their visit. The narrator of 'Going to the Dogs' is doing just that because he is lost, restless in the interstices between the two worlds of his own narrative - the world of choice, action and self-definition, and the world of reaction, portent and chance. The act of falsifying (again making transitional, 'restless') his name is central: it figures both as self-definition and as arbitrary reaction. In between these two polarities, held in tension by the act itself, the self as anchored essence, the secure, integrated 'I' somewhere disappears, goes to the dogs.

In 'Rock Springs', the next earliest and title story of the collection, a strikingly similar character actually has this 'lack' pointed out to him, and indeed through an examination of this more substantial story some idea of the way in which Ford will later begin to work within this 'deficiency' (which bears, as will be seen, more than a passing resemblance to Carver's epistemic 'delinquency') towards a more positive textualizing of the postmodern self can be seen to appear, in preparation as it were for the fuller explorations of the novels.

The accusation of 'deficiency' follows after a key point in the story, a point where there is a deliberate mixing of texts, an infusion of confused, open-ended 'parable' which may or may not have any metaphorical significance for Edna, the narrator's girlfriend, but which is anyway all but incomprehensible in its pathos (or bathos) to the narrator, Earl. Edna has recalled briefly owning a monkey (won in a bet with a Vietnam veteran) of which she developed an irrational fear, inadvertently killing the animal as a result (through chaining it to the back of a chair while she slept):

I looked over at Edna, smiling, but she was staring at me with eyes that were fierce with anger. 'What's wrong?' I said.

'Don't you care anything about that awful thing that happened to me?...You want to know what I did with that monkey?' Edna said.

'Sure I do,' I said.

'I put her in a green garbage bag, put it in the trunk of my car, drove to the dump, and threw her in the trash.' She was staring at me darkly as if the story meant something to her that was real important but that only she could see and that the rest of the world was a fool for.

'Well that's horrible,' I said. 'But I don't see what else you could do. You didn't mean to kill it. You'd have done it differently if you had. And then you had to get rid of it, and I don't know what else you could have done. Throwing it away might seem unsympathetic to somebody, probably, but not to me. Sometimes that's all you can do, and you can't worry about what somebody else thinks...What else can I say?' I said.

'Nothing,' she said, and stared back at the dark highway. 'I should've known that's what you'd think. You've got a character that leaves something out, Earl. I've known that a long time.'<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps most noticeable in this exchange is that there is in fact little difference between Earl and Edna's reactions to the moral dilemma posed by the story. The dominant tone for both is one of passivity: 'Don't you care about that awful thing *that happened to me*' Edna says, and 'Sometimes that's all you can do...What else can I say?' Earl tells her. The 'something left out' in Earl's character is not simply his moral passivity as such, then. The passivity (seen also of course in their drifting, only tenuously committed lifestyle) is a hallmark of a crucial disjunction between, it could be said, fact and significance. Whereas Edna, in her pity and guilt, can appreciate if not articulate the 'loss' which her passivity entails and can therefore finally leave Earl for the hope of a new beginning, Earl can only relate fact to necessity, not to responsibility: 'But I don't see what else you could do'. This is in some ways a re-casting of a disjunction discussed in relation to Carver's work - the 'delinquent' disjunction between metaphor and metonymy. Just as the sense of loss in the story 'I Could See the Smallest Things' is structured along a dissociating and fissuring of the narrator's perceptions, so in Ford's story a hinted at ontological lack is pictured through the characters' inability to make connections between the transitive and Ideal, sign and meaning, incident and 'essence', 'my plan and what happened...the idea and the act' as Earl puts it.<sup>15</sup> Instead the epistemic vacuum lying between is filled with arbitrary and reactive significations and valorizations (portents, such as the

dashboard light which signals a warning Earl can't interpret) paralleling the existential dislocation and vacuum of passivity before events that lies behind the 'fugitive' lifestyle of so many of Ford's characters. As Edna says to Earl "You don't think right, did you know that, Earl?"(p.21).

Restlessness then can be seen in this story as bearing primarily on loss, or lack, which is in *being*, not simply circumstance. The lack of a centre to the characters' lives is seen in their circumstantial restlessness - their small-time fugitive life on the road - and this is figurally significant; but more important is the lack of centring or cohering potential in their inner selves, their inability to escape the fluid lostness of decontextualized lives, lives lived passively under 'luck', because they are lived *between* the deconstructions of physical (circumstantial) transition (lawlessness, homelessness, joblessness) and the compensating constructions of self that seem almost heroic for Hemingway's 'lost generation', for the dissociated Nick Adams on the 'Ideal' banks of the Big Two-Hearted River, but are absurd self-deceptions for Ford's postmodern, 'unselfed' Earl on the seat of a stolen Mercedes:

I thought, then, how I never planned things well enough. There was always a gap between my plan and what happened, and I only responded to things as they came along and hoped I wouldn't get in trouble. I was an offender in the law's eyes. But I always *thought* differently, as if I weren't an offender and had no intention of being one, which was the truth. But as I read on a napkin once, between the idea and the act a whole kingdom lies. And I had a hard time with my acts, which were oftentimes offender's acts, and my ideas, which were as good as the gold they mined there where the bright lights were blazing.(p.27)

It was claimed at the beginning of this study of Ford's early work that the first two novels reveal a progressively complex reaction against the classic Modernistic response (a broadly Idealistic mythopoeic valorizing) to the problems of selfhood that Ford is addressing. 'Rock Springs' takes us a step further in that progression. In this short narrative many clear overlappings and amplifications of the dilemmas fundamental to *A Piece of My Heart* have been identified, though it is equally clear that these overlappings owe more to 'a serial

movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations' than to a straight duplication of strategic intent. The 'failure' of Earl in 'Rock Springs' is only identifiable with the failure of, say, Sam Newel up to a certain point. The voice that closes the story, Earl's voice, poses questions that Newel or Hewes could never pose:

And I wondered, because it seemed funny, what would you think a man was doing if you saw him in the middle of the night looking in the windows of cars in the parking lot of the Ramada Inn? Would you think he was trying to get his head cleared? Would you think he was trying to get ready for a day when trouble would come down on him? Would you think his girlfriend was leaving him? Would you think he had a daughter? Would you think he was anybody like you?(p.37)

This is a voice which doesn't even carry echoes from the world of Lamb's Mississippi island, but which resonates through all of Ford's later work, from *The Ultimate Good Luck* to *The Sportswriter* and *Wildlife*, and it is with just such a voice, questioning, vulnerable, that Ford, beginning tentatively in the first of these three novels, moves towards an exploration of what may be termed, again echoing this study's earlier readings of Carver, an exploration of the *potentialities* rather than simply the lost or debased *securities* of the 'fundamental narrative' that is postmodern existence.

Earl's questioning at the close of 'Rock Springs' shifts Ford's tropological handling of his characteristic concern with postmodern being in several ways and on several levels. Perhaps most strikingly it creates an almost shockingly (in the hard-boiled, cryptically structured and lavishly textured context of *A Piece of My Heart*) direct rapport between narrator and reader: the interrogation is simple, 'personal' to the point of intimacy, and makes an implicit plea for sympathy. Consonant with this phenomenalistic disruption is a releasing of the tropologically confined textualizing of being seen in *A Piece of My Heart* (Newel and Hewes trapped in the parodic frame of reference provided by the island) and 'Going to the Dogs', this story's narrator oscillating impotently between the two 'lucks' of his figurally 'closed' narrative. For perhaps the first time in Ford's

fiction we see in 'Rock Springs' a disjunction between the codes of the textual self and the codes of its particular circumstances. Previously, character has been, to adapt Hardy's phrase, luck. Earl's questioning disrupts this formula, pulling it apart under the force of the 'socializing' of his predicament. The persistently repeated 'would you' forges a link between both character and reader and also between character (Earl) and an 'absent presence' *within* the text figured by the unseen occupant of the only other lit room in the Ramada Inn besides Earl's, an 'absent presence' which, like Carver's absences, provokes a dis-ease that insinuates itself into the interstices between the codes of familiarity, decaying the semiological bonds between the familiar and the secure:

There were maps and paperback books and sunglasses and the little plastic holders for cans that hang on the window wells. And in the back there were kids' toys and some pillows and a cat box with a cat sitting in it staring up at me like I was the face of the moon. It all looked familiar to me, the very same things I would have in my car if I had a car. Nothing seemed surprising, nothing different. Though I had a funny sensation at that moment and turned and looked up at the windows along the back of the motel. All were dark except two. Mine and another one. And I wondered, because it seemed funny, what would you think a man was doing if you saw him in the middle of the night looking in the windows of cars in the parking lot of the Ramada Inn?(pp.36-7)

The rhetorical linking of the 'released' 'I' (released from the passive rhetorical fatalism of Earl's reflection that: 'when you get to the point of arguing, you're past the point of changing anybody's mind, even though it's supposed to be the other way, and maybe for some classes of people it is, just never mine'(pp.34-5)) to an implicit other, can be seen as signifying a definite shift in Ford's textualizing of postmodern being. This shift is not in itself a *solution* to the problematics of the earlier work, but it does mark a vital break with the exploration of forms of *isolate* validation (Ford's postmodern wariness of such strategies being of course always evident in the 'habitually' parodic tropic context they seemed to occur in). The result of this break is the beginning not of any of the more usual postmodern lampoonings of textual being<sup>16</sup> but a 'lateral' ontological figuring, consonant with Carver's 'Wittgensteinian' lateral epistemic

figuring, avoiding the metaphysics of essence not through an 'ultimist' reflexive parody (Lawson's 'the glimpse beyond') but a re-writing of 'essence'.

'Rock Springs' is, then, in many ways a pivotal fiction, marking the point where a parodic 'textual view of life' gives way to a 'textual view of life' within which we can still find the rhetorical destabilizing of 'grammatical' securities of being but also the complex attempts at adequation brilliantly worked through in Ford's finest novel to date *The Sportswriter*. It is easy to see that in very important ways Ford works towards Frank Bascombe from even Hewes and Newel, but Bascombe, and *The Sportswriter* as a whole, are not properly comprehensible in the context of this study without an examination of the novel which lies between Earl's questions at the close of 'Rock Springs' and Bascombe's tentative attempts at answers. In fact, *The Ultimate Good Luck* is if nothing else a novel which turns thematically on precisely the ontological implications of 'Rock Springs': the freeing of the textual self from tropic impotence to rhetorical potency in the socializing, or making 'transitive' and inessential, of the validating impulse.

Ironically, the very first sentence of *The Ultimate Good Luck* calls to mind the opening sentence of 'Going to the Dogs', the story which perhaps best exemplifies what Ford, in this novel, is leaving behind. There is very little to distinguish between the substance of 'My wife had just gone out West with a groom from the local dog track, and I was waiting around the house for things to clear up, thinking about catching the train to Florida to change my luck'(p.109) and the more condensed 'Quinn knew he needed to get lucky'(p.1). Irony aside, this 'doubling' is not just vaguely suggestive, it is highly significant since the similarity in question isn't an isolated curiosity but arguably part of a pattern of correspondences which link the two texts.

Without repeating the earlier analysis of this story, it is perhaps sufficient to note that whereas the narrative strategies of 'Rock Springs' offer an implicit *transcending* of the earlier story's ontological paralysis, *The Ultimate Good Luck*

provides an explicit thematic *reworking* of the stasis which is the hallmark of 'Going to the Dogs'. The novel both adopts the story's rhetoric of confinement (the 'leitmotifs' of luck and a rootless vulnerability to and passivity before circumstance) and yet moves beyond even 'Rock Springs' in its new breaking down of that tropological/ontological paralysis. Whilst the opening sentences of 'Going to the Dogs' and *The Ultimate Good Luck* seem almost identical in substance then, in fact the tropic context of each text moulds the notion of a 'change of luck' into two very distinct things, and the discrepancy between the two is perhaps the true measure of how far and how successfully the implications of the pivotal 'Rock Springs' are worked out in this deceptively generic, though in fact restlessly exploratory, second novel.

The most telling disjunction between the two texts occurs immediately after the terse opening sentence of the novel. Just three lines on we read: 'Luck, Quinn thought, was always infatuated with efficiency'. In this simple aphoristic formula are, arguably, the roots of every ontological significance in the text; its implications encompass not just a critical departure from the tropic fatalism of the earlier fiction, but also a deconstruction of its own terms as the novel progresses. Using this aphorism as a touchstone, it can be seen that this novel is more than a means of generically re-siting the ontological problematics raised in *A Piece of My Heart* - it is above all a restless, probing and unsettling textual exploration which prefigures even the seemingly so alien subtleties and complexities of *The Sportswriter* at least as much as it is itself prefigured by the sardonic nihilism of *A Piece of My Heart*. In understanding the various and sometimes conflicting pressures towards securities and potentiality of being in this fiction, several tropological currents of significance are perhaps best followed; firstly the figural 'loading' not only of landscape but of almost all empirical reality, not just because this offers a convenient parallel with the Ford's use of landscape in *A Piece of My Heart*, but because nearly every other figural significance keys into it as a tropic strategy.

The valorizing of *A Piece of My Heart's* physical landscape depended heavily on a static, almost mythic tropic figure - that of the island, the isolated, *separate* locus where dislocations of familiar reality are almost inevitably accompanied by figurally suggestive disjunctions in *signal* familiarity and hence the epistemological 'realities' or norms expected within the ostensibly 'realistic' text. In contrast, though the narrative of *The Ultimate Good Luck* is also built on a similarly textured half-hologrammatic, half-concretized empirical ambivalence, its figural resonances result not from the parodic clashing of 'mythic' archetype and a subverting 'realistic' idiom, but from a semiological clash of codes grounded in an idiom of cultural and historical as opposed to classically or Modernistically 'mythic' self-hood. Lamb's island provides for the deconstruction of a figural archetype of reconciliation and self-definition, the classical/Modernistic figure of the ontological haven, and as such there is no room in the novel for any ontological rhetoric other than that of postmodern subversion and parody. In dismantling a 'mythic' security Ford is left with an equally 'mythic' insecurity - the isolate self remains as a sort of ontological morpheme, the irreducible unit of existential sense-making even when one loses faith in the notion that any coherent 'sense' can finally be made.

In *The Ultimate Good Luck* however we see a rhetoric which is not finally 'trapped' by its oppositional tropes since its terms are now unbounded by archetypal valorizations/subversions. Instead of parody we see inquiry: the isolate self is subjected to the 'violations' of both violence and love - dissociation and dislocation become socialized, as does therefore any hope of re-orientation. The world of this second novel is not then rhetorically self-defining as was Lamb's debased, parodically Idealistic Mississippi island; rather it pushes restlessly towards a questioning of both the securities of essential being and the securities of irredeemable alienation.

The oppositions which constitute this restlessness are complex and affect the whole of the novel's fictional 'reality'. They can be identified as a cultural/political reality for instance in an almost dialectical opposition between

the almost hallucinogenically luminous immediacy of Oaxaca and the all-pervasive, debased semiological totems and shadows of North America. More fundamentally they occur in even the depiction of physical reality.

The entire empirical/signal 'ground' of the novel is held in a constant state of ambivalent tension, then: Oaxaca is invested with an oppressive physical immediacy in the text ('The day had begun to hot up. Second-class buses wallowed in through the streets, windows full of mute Indian faces. Diesel had begun to overpower the sweet cinnamon smell filtering out of the mercado. All the fountains were on'(p.114)) but at the same time this immediacy, or empirical 'solidity', is never allowed to become empirical *security*. Drugs feature recurrently as almost a motif of 'Oaxacan' reality. Sonny, along with many other Americans is imprisoned there for drug smuggling and there are constant references to anything from Quaaludes, Peyote buttons and marijuana to the Lomotil Quinn takes for his dysentery, the drug motif permeating the disturbingly intense, 'pressured' narrative with a persistent threat of perceptual 'slippage'.

More directly and more threateningly empirical solidity and its illusory security can be literally as well as perceptually exploded, stripped bare to a latent 'reality' underlying the previously 'dominant' signal one. Thus the description of the town square given above is almost immediately followed by:

The Americans stopped below a chiropractor's neon sign made to look like a spine, all the vertebrae curved and articulated, and bracketed to the chiropractor's windowsill...They stood beside the Baskin-Robbins, and the girl was staring up while her father pointed out the sign, sweeping his big arm up and down to explain the shape...at that moment the Baskin-Robbins exploded...

...There was one great bulb of orange flame roaring outward and bursting apart in the air, and then a huge hot noise, and then the air suddenly was emptied of sound and filled with a baked greenish dust...A bright green taxi that had been in front of the Baskin-Robbins was blown away from the curb and into the street...The Baskin-Robbins, Quinn could glimpse through the panes of rising dust, looked like a garbage can emptied and kicked on its side. Whatever was inside was blown outside now or gone altogether. The chiropractor's sign was missing. There were rag figures strewn on the sidewalk and in the street, but nothing was moving or flailing...

...Quinn was on his feet going towards the Americans or toward where they had been a moment before, but weren't now. Outside the park shade the sun was suddenly much hotter and brighter, and he could smell rank-burned metal and cordite. It was

familiar and became almost pleasant when the air  
overheated.(pp.114-5)

Importantly, the explosion is described not simply as destructive, but as horrifically *transformative* (just like the chiropractor's peculiarly 'Mexican' skeletal sign, it fulfills the 'semiological' function of making 'Whatever was inside...outside now'). The violence of the explosion and the cultural/historical opposition it signals is textualized, then, or becomes consonant with a *semiological* conflict. Arbitrariness collides with the codes of security and dominance, of *familiarity*. It is familiar to Quinn because, paradoxically, it is precisely this violent deconstruction of the culturally familiar that has fashioned his life during and after Vietnam.

In contrast to the 'ontological topography' of *A Piece of My Heart*, then, we can identify a far more complex matrix of valorizations/subversions in this novel. 'Myth' appears now (almost suggesting a darker version of Barthes' *Mythologies*) as a cultural/epistemic security (American slogans and 'icons' from 'Try God' T-shirts to Pepsi-Cola and the nuclear family) not simply to be challenged, subverted and finally deconstructed by the anarchic, random violence of Oaxaca, but rather as a 'dialectical' necessity which thereby allows for an ontological dynamic in place of a parodic stasis. The episode of the explosion for instance is not simply an opportunity to sardonically expose the fragility of the mythic 'securities of being' accreting to the American nuclear family (its 'atom' split by the blast in no uncertain terms) - this is established by the tone of Ford's descriptions of the family's behaviour, but then undercut by the grisly pathos of their deaths as Quinn wanders the square, finding fragments of them scattered along the street. The simpler dynamic of subversion which dominated *A Piece of My Heart* gives way to something both more subtle and more problematic which is to be found not in the basic fact of desacralization, but in the attempt to see beyond that, beyond the simple, emblematic, mythic and hence static 'fight posture' of binary opposition:

People were yelling in Spanish now very fast and loud,  
something he couldn't understand, that sounded like 'I own her.'  
He walked back into an area of sidewalk that was suddenly

deserted, and he felt all at once that he was conspicuous and shouldn't be here and shouldn't let himself be separable at all. There was a theory for that too...He posed an unreasonable risk now. On the front of the chiropractor's building was the long red and black boxing poster he had seen all week and that had not been touched. It showed two giant black boxers with their fists clenched in fight postures above the words 'Sin Empate, Sin Indulto.' No Holds Barred.(p.117)

Other examples of this figural 'pattern' or dynamic of 'cultural' violation and slippage are not difficult to find. Almost whenever America is mentioned it is placed in relation to an Oaxaca or Mexico which turns its myths, its texts of security and privilege, into a stream of incoherent, often menacing signs:

All the stories in the American news were published in the wrong syntax...There was a story about a grandmother in South Dakota stabbing a lion to death with a button hook inside her travel camper. The story didn't say how the lion had come inside the camper or why there was a lion around at all. Mexicans would understand it. Americans lived in an ocean-to-ocean freak show, and there was a good reason to be here where things were simple instead of up there where things were bent wrong.(pp.48-9)

'Americans thrive on protecting privileges nobody else would ever want'(p.10), Quinn recalls his Mexican lawyer Bernhardt saying, and then we are given a description of Oaxaca which juxtaposes the American emblems (Pepsi sign, the American Highway) of security and material familiarity with, again, a random, arbitrary menace violating the 'privileges' signified by an emblem such as the American Highway:

[Quinn] counted landmarks every night. The pink rotator on the airport tower...the hollow lights that shone all night on the cathedral opposite the zocalo, and the red Pepsi script shimmering far out in the Mixtec barrios beyond the river...The American Highway curled down the mountains, split, circled the city two ways, then reunited, and the only detectable movement there was the lights of an overland truck gearing down before flattening out into the valley. Americans were off the road hours ago. The trucks and the Dinas would blink their lights, then run you off the cliffsides.(p.10)

Quinn's response to this landscape is significantly loaded with many of the key figures of ontological significance (luck, isolation, existential immediacy) that are to be developed as the novel progresses:

Quinn thought when you hung out in the present, which he did, you slipped free of the past, though not the future, and all the anxieties came in at higher calibers. It was why he liked fucking phony Italian girls from the Portal, and why he'd let Rae leave when she got ready. Too much future, too much anxiousness. In

the present, he knew precisely how it would feel every time: the contact, then the being alone, then somebody else coming in to fill up the space. That was manageable, and you felt lucky and not anxious, and when it wasn't done right, like this time, it didn't matter.(p.10)

Furthermore, both the 'emblems' used in this episode to denote American 'securities' are used again for much the same purpose in what can be seen as almost elaborations on this early scene. On the way out to Zago's mansion the Highway is first made explicitly emblematic of the familiar, the 'quintessentially' American, and then is drained of this familiarity and filled instead with a menacing, invasive *textualizing* ('Everybody'd heard the *stories*') of its former, illusory 'essence':

Bernhardt took the highway north, the direction of no lights. Quinn let the air flood in, cool and without odor, no sage or the smell of corn being burned. It could've been anywhere, Michigan or Louisiana or California...There were phantom cars on the road, coming high speed, Americans scared of stalling on the highway. Men with machetes wandering out of the agave fields to lie by the road. Everybody'd heard the stories.(p.136)

These stories are given an ambiguous narrative fulfillment which is subversive in a double sense - the real threat on the highway turns out not to be machete-wielding peasants, but the police and army. Earlier in the novel Quinn passes a group of American college girls held up by soldiers:

Back in the line a red Dodge van was waiting for inspection...Inside were three rows of American college girls all talking at once and looking out the dusty windows at the front of the line...Quinn watched the girls go by. He wondered which ones would have to pull down their jeans for the soldiers and what they would tell whoever was paying for the trip. It was going to be an adventure.(p.20)

And later, on the way back from the prison Quinn passes the van again:

They were approaching the army spec station from the opposite direction. More buses sat queued on the dusty shoulder wheezing smoke...The red travel van that had been in the queue before was parked beside the station hut with all its windows broken and its seats pulled out. None of the girls was around anymore. They were Americans, but there was nothing he could do for them, and it gave him a cold bone feeling to wonder where they were and what they were getting to look at next.(p.34)

As well as the highway motif, the Pepsi 'icon' too is elaborated on as a 'site' for the violation of quintessential securities, and in fact the highway provides the

context again for this; even the College van is mentioned, tying the significances of each incident and each motif still more closely together:

Ahead of him a Pepsi truck had driven off the airport road and blundered onto its side. All the Pepsi bottles had spilled on the ground and two Mexicans without shirts were standing in the field drinking Pepsis, other bottles already stuck in their pockets and down their pants...though the truck was on fire and there was a chance it might explode...He made a wide turnout to avoid the truck, a brand new cab-over Mercedes with PEPSI stencilled backward in red script across the blunt nose. When he got beyond the cab he could see in the mirror the driver inside, his face sprouting blood and jammed up into the windshield...Rae didn't need to see that. It would make her think the wrong thing, like the American girls gone out of the van in the morning. Everything got harder.(p.70)

A certain patterning behind such initially random- seeming episodes of violence and violation is clear to see, then. In every case something far more complex than a hard-boiled chronicling of the case is in progress - namely a subtly manipulated foregrounding of culturally defined epistemic securities which are then overturned (literally in the case of the truck) in order to show the vulnerability of such a signal familiarity and hence 'security'.

It is hardly surprizing then that the empirical landscape of Quinn's Oaxaca is easily dislocated into psychological and even ontological landscapes: the subverting of cultural securities is never allowed to rest on a 'political' level. Ford makes a point of tying the semiological deconstructions inextricably to the actual 'deconstruction' of selves: the family of tourists, literally de-constructed, the truck driver, the presumably violated college girls). Thus texts of being are fundamentally bound up in the text with the fragile neon or stencilled texts of cultural identity. The clear implication is that the 'codifying' of being is as vulnerable a textual security as the so easily destroyed or violated Pepsi ads, Baskin and Robbins' or the American Highway, an implication confirmed at several points in the text besides those given above. For instance, when Quinn is being driven by Bernhardt out on the periferico, the road to the peripheral, slum and guerrilla zone of the city, we find a very interesting opposition set up between the Centro (security, however vulnerable) and the periphery (the unfamiliar) and more particularly a loose, though suggestive, correlation of the

latter landscape with the dissolution of being in Quinn's question 'Does it matter if you hit somebody?', in Bernhardt's talk of suicide and later in their visit to the dead boy's hut, the cryptically signifying object of their journey to the periphery, to the margin, to the 'ex-centric':

'Does it matter if you hit somebody?' Quinn said.

Bernhardt shook his head. He watched the road attentively as it narrowed into the dense palms. 'The law makes more trouble than the good you do to stop...when the law takes you, it wants to determine why things. *Why* you do this? *Why* you do that? And if you don't mean to, there's no why, and they never let you go. But the man is still dead'...

'Where's this going?' He thought about Rae in the Centro. It was making him edgy to be away.

'It will take only a few minutes.' Bernhardt flicked up the brights and Quinn could see up the long corridor of palm trunks diminishing quickly into a hole of darkness. It felt like a picture from a dream in which events never completely conclude.

'Do you fear becoming old?' Bernhardt asked expansively, keeping his eyes on the road.

'I fear not becoming old a lot more,' Quinn said...

...'I do fear it,' Bernhardt said emphatically. He kept his chin high. 'I am forty, a young man. But I consider sometimes suicide. It is only fear of being old, do you agree?'

'I go the other way,' Quinn said. 'At least I hope I do.'

'You were in the war,' Bernhardt said. 'You don't think of suicide now.'

'Maybe later,' Quinn said. He stared at the undifferentiated wall of trees.(pp.92-3)

An equally telling passage which uses the same oppositions (centre/periphery, privileged 'rights'/'needs') and links them to an even more clearly ontological rhetoric can also be found at the point where Bernhardt is approaching the peripheral landscape of the 'marginales':

Bernhardt made a U-turn on the boulevard and stopped at the opposite curb. The camp had a wide public quality that made it seem knowable and unmemorable, like the faces in the buses waiting out on the highway. Humanity without secrets...'They come one time, maybe for Cinco de Mayo, and then don't leave,' Bernhardt said as if the sight was an understatement of a much more illuminating truth. He sniffed significantly. 'I have clients here,' he said. They climb poles, take electricity, become a nuisance. Some are electrocuted. Sometimes the army comes with clubs and beat them at night. They have no rights, only needs, and so suddenly they are guerrillas.'

'Am I supposed to sympathize?' Quinn said...

...'It is possible to work here without sympathizing. Maybe I don't like your existence. But...'

'What's that designed to do for me?' Quinn said.

'Your business is complicated,' Bernhardt answered. 'But it is not the only business. Everyone is marginal.'(p.106)

We can, then, move beyond the cultural focus of the persistent signal oppositions between the American and Mexican and see in the clashing of secure and contingent, centre and periphery, an engagement with and challenge to texts or codes of personal being as well as cultural identity which has been 'the understatement of a much more illuminating truth', namely the truth that 'everyone is marginal'; or everyone is 'ex-centric'.<sup>17</sup>

It is significant in the context of such a critical engagement that Quinn begins the novel living self-consciously by an unmistakably Hemingwayesque 'code': self-consciously enough to have it ('Good Conduct') tattooed on his arm. More to the point however is that this code is, from the beginning, under assault in the novel. The ontological movement of the text is one of friction between Quinn's valorizations of the code-as-security ('In the war you maintained your crucial distance from things and that kept you alive, and kept everything out in front of you and locatable'(p.44)) and an acceptance of a textuality, an 'ontological syntax' which neither straightforwardly parodies the 'grammar' of the code nor accepts its Ideal enclosure (its 'private language' as Wittgenstein would call it<sup>18</sup>) whether as minimalist opacity or mythic inviolability but rather struggles towards a threshold of association,<sup>19</sup> variously articulated as 'love', 'trust', 'the ultimate good luck' - that which 'locates' and provides not a static, 'mythic' standard, but a new 'grammar', a new 'frame of reference'. As the Italian girl Quinn meets at the beginning of the novel tells him, both of them 'foreigners in a strange country' in every sense:

'That's the problem for foreigners in a strange country,' she said.

'What's that?' he said.

'A frame of reference,' she said. 'You lack a frame of reference that allows you to take the right mental picture...I trusted you,' she said, and cleared her throat of smoke. 'You know trust is at the heart of love and art and all kinds of shit. And you could have just had me off. What does that shitty tattoo say on your arm?'

'*Good conduct*,' Quinn said. 'It's supposed to keep me out of trouble. But it doesn't work.'

'Well I think you're an asshole,' she said. 'Only asshole trash have tattoos. You and your fucking muscles.'(p.12)

Whereas *A Piece of My Heart* left Newel and Hewes alone and helpless with their 'fucking muscles', their self-reliant inability to break through their impenetrably closed codes of obsession and self-consciousness, Ford here begins to explore the possibilities of regaining a usable 'frame of reference', of re-entering the world of otherness (ontologically the world of *différance*), of 'finding [ones] way about', in Wittgenstein's phrase.

Crucial to this exploration is the character of Rae, Quinn's lover, and by extension their relationship, the salvaging of which is of course the actual motive behind the events of the novel.

There are two main 'entry points' whereby Rae as a character slips through the generic surface layer of Ford's thriller and into the ontological dynamics which underlie its more obvious thematic structures of suspense and deferment. The first links her figurally to the earlier discussion of empirical/signal ambiguity and to the consequent analysis of Quinn's rigid and 'private' grammar of being within such an unstable reality; the second involves her as intimately as Quinn with the figural 'leitmotif' of the text, 'luck'.

The first of these tropic 'dislocations' occurs when we learn that she is a landscape artist, the second when we learn that Quinn met her first at the dog track (again recalling 'Going to the Dogs') and more importantly when we read 'for a moment, with her close to him, his cheek on the cold glass, he felt himself fully located for once, and in a world in which time couldn't pass'(p.157) in the light of Ford's earlier definition of 'the ultimate good luck':

He liked that, the high-density sensation of solo work at night. It made you feel out of time and out of real space and located closer to yourself, as if located was the illusion, the one thing he'd missed since he'd come back, the ultimate good luck.(p.77)

The implication is that by the end of the novel Quinn's existential isolationism has crumbled, has given way to an ontological relativism which, far from Idealistically excluding otherness, *requires* it; in place of a protective dissociation characterizing 'the ultimate good luck', then, we find a reciprocal,

'dangerous' (because now by definition contingent, inessential) association dependent on Rae.

In order to understand the full significance of this progression however we must first go back to an analysis of the figural 'layering' of not just the motif of 'luck' but also the deceptively simple fact of Rae's work as a landscape artist. In this way we can see that Ford's underlying concerns are far more to do with questions of identity and otherness, being and *différance* than with romance as such. Love, like luck, is here arguably as much an ontological as a thematic textual emblem.

It has already been noted earlier in this study that in Hemingway's best typological 'performances' the aesthetic and the ontological become one in the text. Arguably, in *The Ultimate Good Luck* Ford has created two characters in whom he can effectively devolve this Modernist authorial strategy, and through whom he can attempt to deconstruct the ontological impasse it creates. The Hemingwayesque code that Quinn has attempted to live by since Vietnam has already been noted, but a more complex link with Hemingway's Modernistic valorizing of the threatened self is Quinn's artist-like, even Cézanne-like, re-creating of the physical world around him:

In Vietnam Quinn had made a minor science of light-study. Light made all the difference in the way you performed and how you made out, since everything was a matter of seeing and not seeing. The right distribution of eastern grey and composite green on the surface of an empty paddy and a line of coconut palms could give you a loop, and for a special celestial moment you wouldn't be there at all, but out of it, in an evening's haze of beach on Lake Michigan with teals like flecks of grey space skittering down the flyway toward Indiana, and the entire day would back up sweetly against a heavy wash of night air. And you could put it away then, ease your eyes, and wander outside another moment and join the world before the landscape began to function again as a war zone.(p.24)

This is not the only 'reference' to art other than the less oblique references regarding Rae: the following episode interestingly goes on to link the Ideal motif of art-as-perception with the American/Mexican 'cultural' oppositions which have already been examined:

The American women who had set up their easels beside the cathedral were already in the Portal having coffees, sitting in the oily shade admiring their intentions...While he watched, a Mexican boy in a red T-shirt appeared at the wall of the cathedral. The boy stared at the easels for a moment and at the girls standing on the stone steps, then darted down the row of easels, kicking the third legs so that the easels were all flattened in ten seconds, the paints spilled over the stones, and the boy vanished back in the crowds down Bustamante. One of the women in the Portal screamed, but most of them just sat still when they saw the easels go. It was efficient work, a nice symmetry. The women should've been able to tell, he thought, that precisely that event would take place. But they couldn't. It was what made them tourists. They looked and didn't see.(p.48)

The knowledge that Rae is a landscape painter, then, seems hardly intended as 'innocent' information by Ford. Surrounding the innocuous sentence 'Rae said she was a landscape painter from New York'(p.39) is on the one hand a clear identification of art - specifically landscape art - with the preservation of self (physically and psychically) in conditions of great danger and on the other hand an equally clear identification of it with an alienation and consequent shallowness of perception which exposes to 'violation': the artists in the Porto 'look but don't see', which makes them 'tourists' and makes their being, as it were, 'accidental' (again it is worth recalling the Italian girl's diagnosis of 'foreigners in a strange country' and their lack of 'a frame of reference'). Here Ford is once more 'doubling' cultural and 'fundamental' or ontological significations. Both of these apparently incongruous identifications - art with self-preservation and art with 'blindness' - are important to a reading of Rae's figural significance in the text, as can be seen when Quinn's reflection on his first meeting with Rae, which forms the whole of the fifth chapter, is studied.

As if in order to 'prime' this reflection with the sense of a signifying doubleness, of a layering to the ostensibly simple account of a downbeat, small-town pick-up, Ford prepares for their initial meeting with a passage which shadows what follows with quite explicitly epistemic and ontological dimensions (again the notion of 'periphery' and 'margin' recall both the cultural and ontological ramifications of the 'ex-centric'), thus investing any 'reading' of the relationship which follows with stakes far higher (the gambling metaphor is of

course Ford's own) than might be assumed should it be taken at its generic face value:

He had had a sense when he joined the marines that the country he was skying out of was a known locale, with a character that was exact and coordinate and that maintained a certain patterned feel. A thing you could get back with if you had a reason. But that patterned feel had gotten disrupted somehow, as though everything whole had separated a little inch, and he had dropped back in between things, to being on the periphery without a peripheral perspective...he felt alone without quite feeling bad, like being in the afterimage of a catastrophe, though he thought he'd gotten used to catastrophes all right without falling apart.(pp.36-7)

Similarly, Rae herself is introduced in a far from 'innocent' way, raising the figural 'stakes' with questions at once sardonic and yet, in the context of Quinn's preceding reflections, suggestively ambivalent:

'What d'you think they do with the ones that don't win?' she said, and looked back at the suspended screen as though she'd asked the question to no one in particular, not even herself.

'Shoot 'em,' he said quickly, and took another survey of the pavilion to see if somebody was coming after her.

'I've got a candidate, then,' she said flatly, 'but he already left, I guess.'

'You just read this crap between races?' he said. He didn't know who Fourier was, but he was betting he was somebody who started a revolution in Jamaica.

Rae smiled appealingly and snapped her head to sweep her long hair off her shoulders. 'He doesn't know enough,' she said, and sighed. 'The guy who knows everything is the guy who runs the rabbit. He's in control of fate. You don't know him, do you?'(p.38)

It is not surprising then that when Ford tells us more about her painting we can quite easily find clues which not only set up subtle and far-reaching links between herself and Quinn as regards their loss of 'location' (set against this is a characteristic restlessness - Rae and Frank Oliver, her previous lover, live very much the lifestyle of Edna and Earl in 'Rock Springs') but more importantly an implicit critique of the modes of being such a loss can reduce the self to. First Ford describes her life with Frank Oliver, a description which carefully connects (through the word 'draw') the act of painting landscapes with the 'act' of defining/constructing a stable sense of self in opposition to the flux of circumstance which is, after all, what the rootless lifestyle so often depicted by Ford represents at its most basic level:

Frank Oliver drove a big blue and silver Southwind that he'd stolen, with a painting of Mount Rainier on both sides and a two-stall horse trailer...and he pulled the trailer around the country to stock shows and rodeos, wherever he could ride broncs and strip cars for parts. The Southwind had a big stereo and red velour swivel chairs and indirect light, and she said the whole thing surprized her about herself, but she had discovered Cabot and spent one straight four-month period inside the RV, painting landscapes out the window, reading and getting stoned in the mornings with Frank, and riding through towns trying to draw a good mental picture of whatever she'd been doing for seven years and not been able to stay exactly current with.(p.40)

A correlation is clearly being set up by Ford between the aesthetic and the ontological, the process of aesthetic composition being consonant with a process of self-composition. Even as early as *A Piece of My Heart* of course such congruences can be seen to be tenuous at best, fatal at worst (Hewes' obsessive affair with Beuna is an aesthetic of sorts - a means of 'patterning' an intensity of feeling), but until Rae this seemed very much just the irredeemable lot of the 'luckless', the dis-located, selves in whom the 'texts' of being itself are 'split', whose 'narratives' of memory, conscience and even action, instead of unifying the self-in-time, instead of investing it with an integrity of identity, of *essence*, dissociate it (Newel admits that "'Everything I think I know is ambiguous...I'm flying apart a mile a millisecond for that very reason'", and for Quinn 'Memory seemed like an account full of the wrong currency'(p.94)). Certainly this 'diffraction of self' [and] transgression of the identity principle' is still a reality in *The Ultimate Good Luck*; the difference now is simply that Ford, through Rae and through a dynamic rather than parodic treatment of the oppositions between ontological 'myth' and the existential 'farce' (or 'slapstick' as Newel described it) of experience, has begun to deconstruct its stoic, isolationist, ultimately sterile securities. Thus it is *Quinn's* Oaxaca that becomes littered with broken emblems of American familiarity and hence security: the false sense of locatedness they offer is demolished by the black 'farces' of road crashes where the police end up drinking the spilt Pepsi whilst standing over the forgotten body of the driver, bombs exploding in shopping centres simply as a diversion for a nearby burglary - a trick, a practical joke of sorts, the 'slapstick' of Newel's father's death. But what

gives these threats to the doctrine of 'Good Conduct' the final push into disintegration is not finally violence, but, through Rae, love.

Again, we see the beginnings of this ontological movement in the context of his meeting with Rae. In Ford's description of their 'first date' we can see beneath an apparently straightforward exchange the first real intimation in the book of an interactive, *social* definition of self, a laconic and subtle step away from a mode of being exemplified by her life with Frank, simply painting passing landscapes, never inhabiting any but the landscape of her own 'self contained system', her own code or text, her own 'soul':

'Those little self-contained systems just get smaller,' she said, when Quinn was almost asleep. 'They're fine. But they don't tolerate enough. You know what I mean? You don't, do you?' He could hear her in a drowse. 'They're like Frank. They make things simple. I thought I could get along with that. I should have figured it out a long time ago that I couldn't.'(p.42)

This step is *towards* a mode of being which is defined not by 'authority', whether personal or imposed, but by *exploratory* (the running of Quinn's hand over her stomach introduces Rae's "'No judgements on the first date?'" and inessential ("don't let me put any pressure on you. I don't want to do that. This'll be over soon enough.") *relations*. As Quinn says of 'naming', "Somebody else has to do that":

'Maybe I'm a bum,' she said. 'I just missed being a hippie...'  
...'You can't call yourself a bum,' he said. 'Somebody else has to do that. You don't get it both ways.'  
Rae sighed a long sigh. 'But is that what you think about me?' she said, not interested in it. 'You've been protecting our country's honour. You should be an authority.'  
'I don't know you well enough,' he said, and ran his hand over her flat stomach.  
'No judgements on the first date?'  
'I'm not an authority on anything,' he said. 'That's all...'  
...'Don't let me put any pressure on you. I don't want to do that. This'll be over soon enough.'(p.42)

It is during a later recollection of Quinn's however that perhaps the most significant movement away from the impasse of *A Piece of My Heart* is made, a recollection centred on his parents and his childhood rather than directly on Rae, though the movement it initiates then bears down very much on their relationship and in doing so consolidates and dramatically extends the figural

significances hinted at earlier. The concepts of 'luck' and 'locatedness' are finally seen not in the isolate, 'mythic' terms of 'Good Conduct' and 'the high density sensation of solo work at night' (implicitly rejected in Quinn's realisation of his alienation from his mother's 'character and incorruptibility', both, of course, ontologically 'loaded' terms for Ford) but in terms arguably prepared for in the passage quoted above, that is in terms of *relations*, of *social* self definition and finally (though it is only presented negatively at this point, as the implicit alternative to 'being absorbed right into nothing, into the very luckless thing you were most afraid of') self-validation:

[Quinn's mother] thought that she herself was totally incorruptible, and that she should encourage at least obstinacy in them both, which would do the work character and incorruptibility would've done if they had existed in them. It was why, Quinn thought, his father had been glad to lose his hand and quit farming and wanting to farm, and why his mother had waked up screaming. She didn't know when you'd gone too far with something and when obstinance and self-denying became a bigger threat than whatever loss it kept away in the first place. And his father, finally, had to learn that in a hard way.

The point was, he knew now, after all those months alone in the trailer and in the Scout and out in the woods in the tent, that everybody lives in some relation to the luckless, whether they call it that or something else, or whether they manage to live near it or far away. And what mattered most was that you *knew* the relation moment to moment, like the one he felt now, the particular danger, so that your life turned out to be a matter of what you did to make that bearable, since you couldn't get so far from it as to make it not exist. Though when you *tried* to protect yourself completely and never suffer a loss or a threat, you ended up with nothing. Or worse, you ended up being absorbed right into nothing, into the very luckless thing you were most afraid of.(p.127)

It is not difficult to support this reading from the text. Almost whenever we come across an exchange between Quinn and Rae on the problems of their relationship, we are simultaneously pitched into a consideration of a specific ontological struggle: the struggle out of false, 'mythic' securities of enclosed, estranged self hood and into an alternative which for much of the novel is termed simply 'love', 'locatedness', or by implication (because it offers a new locatedness) 'the ultimate good luck'.

But the apparent simplicity, even naivety of such a formula is misleading - in destroying a security of being 'love' is a violation as much as a release, and in a

novel filled with violations of false securities which are far from unproblematic we have to go deeper than simple affirmations in order to understand properly the possibilities for validation towards which Ford seems to be directing the text. In the following passage, part of Quinn's recollection of the causes of the initial break-up of his relationship with Rae in Michigan, all these ambiguities can be clearly traced, the ontological 'shadowing' being particularly obvious in Quinn's acknowledgement that his dissociation is a *condition of being*, mirrored, not caused by, the necessity for survival in war, and the references to the Indian mysticism (primitive ontology) of alone-ness and its value as protection against 'everything they don't know about' - against otherness, and for Quinn against the otherness *within* being, the threatening *différance* articulated ("I don't know what else you call it") as love:

'I thought you'd ease up. I thought it was because of the war, but that's not right, is it?'

...'I could've told you that,' he said...

...'I don't know what you expect me to do,' she said.

'Nothing,' he said. 'Anything.' He began to eat his eggs.

'But can you please just tell me what it is you don't like or do like. I feel by myself even when you *are* here anymore.'

He looked up at her across the table. 'I don't know what I can do about that,' he said. 'You can be by yourself *with* me.'

'And is that good enough for you?' she said.

'I guess so...I'm alone most of the time,' he said.

She smiled at him. 'Does that make you feel powerful? That's what the Indians think. They think it protects them. Except you don't need protecting, do you, Harry?'

'Everybody needs protecting,' he said.

'From what?'

'From everything they don't know about.'

'But why do you want to call that being in love?' she said.

'I don't know what else you call it.'

She stood up from the table. 'We make a hell of a couple,' she said.

'Maybe I'm not a very nice person. You know?' He tried to catch her eye. 'Maybe something ruined me.'

'I don't know,' Rae said. 'I don't know what you are. But God knows I wouldn't want to violate you.' She walked out of the room.(p.79)

We see then in Rae and in Quinn's relationship with her a critique of the myths of isolate security, but it remains unclear as to how those myths can be deconstructed without leaving chaos in their place; Ford makes a telling point of always filling the 'vacuum' left by the deconstruction or violation of American

myths of security with a far more sinister semiological confusion, and so after the bombing in the Centro we read:

Bernhardt was weaving toward the carretera, staying near the curbs and making his turns elaborately. At an intersection the zocalo appeared suddenly back down the inky streets, the cathedral kliegs at the end gaseous and silver and imprecise. Soldiers stood in the middle ground, their rifles picketing the light, and the shrill sound of whistles came out of the dark. It was like Mardi Gras, looking up Orleans toward Jackson Park at 4.00 A.M., the odd insulated feeling of time being lost.

'Where're we going?' Quinn said.

'The country,' Bernhardt replied expansively. 'Don't worry about the soldiers.'

'What're they doing?' Rae said from the back seat.

'Searching for paintings, or what they can find. Terrorism is faulty, it exposes unexpected things. Other peoples' business sometimes'...

'...I don't see why they close the main streets and leave the dark ones open,' Rae said. Her voice was flat and expressionless, like the soldiers' eyes.

'Some streets are secured so they may be used to different purposes,' Bernhardt said, engaged. 'In the dark if you are not the army maybe you are a criminal. And if there is a mistake it must be hidden.'(pp.134-5)

It is not enough simply to see the inadequacy of enclosure, of self-protection, since seeing it is not in itself a release from it - there is a risk that has to be taken, a violation that has to be accepted, a 'violence', even 'disaster' (again, de Man's 'potential catastrophe') that is the other side of the disruptive, deconstructive violence that threatens in the terrorist bombing:

He thought now, though, watching the lights beginning to prickle out across the valley and beyond the mountain rim like greying stars, that the threat of death in that instance was only the dark side of something else, something he needed - Rae, maybe - and would have to live with unexplained until he got it, or until he stopped wanting it anymore, and at the same time stopped wanting everything else too, which was just a disaster of a different order.(pp.88-9)

This is perhaps the most important and complex link in the book between the personal and ontological 'texts' of Quinn and Rae's characters, the link between a deconstruction of secure identity and the very possibility of redemption, (a re-writing) of self through that deconstruction, that 'disaster of a different order', since that disaster, whilst opening up the possibility of semiological chaos (the 'dark side', the militia after the bombing) also opens up the possibility of a relation to lives, to an otherness 'limitlessly signifying and

engrossing' which is inaccessible without the risk, without its obverse of meaninglessness and arbitrary extinction:

After dark he lay on the bedspread, dressed, waiting for Bernhardt's car...He thought about a girl he'd fucked when Rae had left, a nursing-college girl from Ann Arbor...When she had her clothes off, on the bed inside the trailer, looking cheerful as if everything was familiar, she said suddenly, 'My father died last month, see, and I felt like no one had ever made an effort to know him, not even my mom.' She smiled as if this was what she really wanted to talk about more than anything. 'And I was really tired, see, of hearing about movie stars and football players, all kinds of other people who had died...A lot of great human beings die and never get any attention, and it makes me angry. Do you know what I mean? They just disappear'...

...'I guess so,' Quinn said, staring at his boots on the cold floor. Her life was complicated with events that obligated her, that were limitlessly signifying and engrossing, but that didn't make any difference to him. He tried to think of his old man and couldn't, tried to think if anybody had paid attention to his old man, and couldn't remember. And it suddenly made him feel trapped, as if empty space was closing down around him, and made him sick with longing, a way he thought he wouldn't feel once Rae was out of it, but that he couldn't keep back now, a feeling of detachment and impairment, something he didn't want ever to happen and thought he had figured how to prevent, but had failed.(pp.131-2)

It is immediately after this recollection that we find Quinn's first attempt to take that risk:

Rae sat at the foot of the bed. He could smell her perfume in the dark air, could feel her nervousness. 'I can't be ironic with you, Harry,' she said quietly. 'I sat out there and wanted to be but I couldn't. I don't protect myself well enough, do I? I just get mad.'

'Do you still want me to protect you?' he said. He thought he might be able to, the first time ever.

'I don't know,' she said. 'I don't like the way you think about things. You look at everything like it disappears down a hole that nothing ever comes out of. And that scares me.' He listened for Bernhardt's car in the street. 'Doesn't that make you lonely?'

'That's not the right question,' Quinn said.

'I'm sorry, then. What's a good question?' she said.

'Whether it makes any difference to me if I *am* lonely,' he said.

'That's what scares me most,' she said. 'Because it doesn't, does it?'

'I'm trying to think it does,' he said. She lay beside him on the bed, and he could feel her heart beating throughout the room. 'I'm trying real hard right now to think it does.'

'Then maybe that's a good sign,' she said. 'I shouldn't ask for a lot more.'(pp.132-3)

It is of course impossible to use this terminology of 'risk' in the context of *The Ultimate Good Luck* without constantly being reminded of the book's figural dependency on the notion of 'luck', a notion which, as has been shown, is

fundamental to Ford's working out of the ontological drama he has set in motion through the ambivalence of the text's representationalism, the critiques and deconstruction of mythic securities of cultural and personal identity and pre-eminently the figural 'loading' and doubleness of the 'emotional dialectic' of Rae and Quinn's relationship.

In concluding this reading of Ford's strategies for a re-casting of the question of a postmodern textualizing of being in *The Ultimate Good Luck*, it is perhaps fair to say that although a convincing case can be made for an affirmative opening out of potentiality in the novel, a strong sense of failure, of compromise, haunts the ending as it simultaneously closes and opens into inconclusiveness and progression, a kinetic promise of new, discursive, indeterminate possibilities, new narratives:

'Do you think you're old enough to live your life unprotected, Harry?' she said. 'You can't back off from what scares you.'  
'Nothing scares me,' he said.  
'Happy birthday, then,' she said. 'Happy birthday to you.' She got out of bed to come with him.(p.201)

The reasons for this are of course debatable, but one overriding factor seems to present itself quite clearly: the determinism of the (dialectical) structural principle underlying Ford's movement towards affirmation or validation. Thus, despite the obvious pains Ford takes in order to prepare us for the novel's 'conclusions', that optimism still seems uncomfortably manufactured. Quinn's progress towards an existential awareness of the demands and limits of responsibility is soundly handled and convincing, resting as it does on his relationship with Bernhardt rather than Rae and taking us from Bernhardt's insisting that "'You are involved'"(p.97) after they see the body of the Mexican boy caught up in the intrigues of Quinn's dilemma (again a dilemma of responsibility) to Quinn's later realization that he can't 'work that trick now', the trick of disengagement, protective dissociation, existential isolationism:

At midnight Quinn came and sat beside her. The popping, clanging of the shooting games was loud and submerging, and he tried just for a moment to hold things in place. Luck was infatuated with efficiency. But he couldn't work that trick now. He thought about driving to St. Louis, headed overseas...He

remembered perfectly buying a cigar and two quarts of beer in a paper sack and walking down in the dusk to see the Cards, all so that he could not think for a time about going to Vietnam. A pressure seemed released and an inevitability forged, and he thought about the day with longing. And his mind now seemed to want that and nothing else.(pp.158-9)

But when Ford, through the figural 'loading' of Quinn's relationship with Rae, attempts to create an ontology to support this existential progression, to underpin its 'moral' of involvement, of relation, with a rationale of textual being, of a 'rhetorical view of life' which is not primarily parodic (as at first sight any notion of being-as-text, self-as-rhetoric, would seem inevitably to be) he finally searches for textual validation in a structuring principle which imposes a 'grammar' as closed as any conventional, metaphysically 'centred' text.

Ford's 'rhetorical view of life' in *The Ultimate Good Luck* succeeds in transcending the reductive parodies of *A Piece of My Heart* then, but in doing so it comes close to ceding that 'rhetorical view of life' to a 'grammar' of imposed, moral closure as compromised and compromising as any 'innocent' realist textualizing of being, however reflexively tropological Ford's imposition may be.

In the story 'Sweethearts', however, (published in 1986) we can see that this point of rest is also, like the parodic scepticism of *A Piece of My Heart*, a point of transition, not settlement.

### 3

As in *The Ultimate Good Luck*, Ford in the story 'Sweethearts' places his protagonist, here the actual narrator, Russell, in a triangular relationship with a lover and a 'loser' who has some emotional claim on the lover and who thereby defines the protagonist in 'some relation to the luckless'. Here the similarities end however, or rather are overturned, since in many ways the story seems written *against* the earlier novel, rather than as a re-working of similar tropic material. Indeed, to begin with Ford actually appears to be parodying the reconciliations arrived at in the novel. Instead of presenting a character in thrall to an almost pathological self-centring which deprives him of love and

consequently of full being, we read the following typically laconic (though, as usual, ontologically laced) exchange:

From the living room I heard Bobby say, 'So how am I going to keep up my self-respect. Answer me that.'

'That's my big problem.'

'You have to get centered,' Arlene said in an upbeat voice. 'Be within yourself if you can.'

'I feel like I'm catching a cold right now,' Bobby said. 'On the day I enter prison I catch cold.'

'Take Contac,' Arlene said. 'I've got some somewhere.' I heard a chair scrape the floor. She was going to get it for him.

'I already took that,' Bobby said. 'I had some at home.'

'You'll feel better then,' Arlene said. 'They'll have Contac in prison.'

'I put all my faith in women,' Bobby said softly. 'I see now that was wrong.'<sup>20</sup>

However, though there does seem to be an element of outright subversion in the relation of the two texts, a far subtler *inter*-relation of the fictions as partly complementary, partly antagonistic dynamics arguably offers a more suggestive and productive reading. Very simply, there are, apart from thematic similarities, two fundamentally important preoccupations common to each text: the idea of sympathy and the idea of responsibility, both notions providing for inter-textual linkages and inversions.

Sympathy for both Russell and Quinn is far from easily achieved, and superficially this fact would seem to link them. "Am I supposed to sympathize?" Quinn asks Bernhardt when confronted with the 'luckless' (the 'marginales') of *The Ultimate Good Luck*, and likewise Russell is throughout ambivalent about the amount of sympathy he owes Bobby: 'I felt sorry for him, and wanted to be as sympathetic as I could be'(p.67), he tells us, but this response is undermined remorselessly in such passages as the following:

And Bobby looked at me then, across the kitchen table, like a man who knows half of something and who is supposed to know everything, who sees exactly what trouble he's in and is scared to death by it.

'I feel like a dead man, you know?' And tears suddenly came into his pale eyes. 'I'm really sorry,' he said. 'I know you're mad at me. I'm sorry.' He put his head in his hands then and cried. And I thought: What else could he do? He couldn't avoid this now. It was all right.

'It's okay, bud,' I said...

...I did not move to touch him, though maybe I should have. But Bobby was not my brother, and for a moment I wished I wasn't

ted to all this. I was sorry I had to see any of it, sorry that each of us would have to remember it.(pp.68-9)

The notion of responsibility also apparently brings Russell and Quinn together as characters. 'Good Conduct' could stand as a motto or code for either of the two men: Russell is quick to define his character in opposition to the luckless and hence luck-ruled Bobby, 'led away to become a prisoner, like a piece of useless machinery'. As Russell goes on to comment 'I didn't think anyone could blame him for anything he ever thought or said or became after that'(p.77), a deterministic, even fatalistic vision which shapes Russell's perceptions of Bobby and, oppositionally, himself: 'I did not want to hear about Bobby anymore for a while. He and I were not alike. Arlene and I had nothing to do with him'(p.78).

In fact, what separates Quinn and Russell as characters is precisely this degree of common ground: Russell mirrors the Quinn we see through most of *The Ultimate Good Luck* - torn between a need for self-protection and isolation and a desire for openness, for 'love', for relational being - but the irony which crucially separates the two characters is simply that Russell is caught by this dissociation whilst *in* a relationship, whilst living precisely the sort of life Quinn for so long finds unmanageable. In other words, the affirmations of *The Ultimate Good Luck* are not simply left behind in this story, they seem to be actually challenged and overturned on their own (now seen to be failed) terms. Thus the mechanics of that affirmation, the dialectical, dynamic structuring of the themes of sympathy and responsibility, are sabotaged, as it were - the figural 'engines' (the themes of sympathy, responsibility, the all-encompassing 'motif' of luck and lucklessness, the opposition between dissociation and an epistemologically/ontologically loaded adequation-through-love) are still there, but strangely static, 'seized up'. Instead of working (albeit often oppositionally) within mechanisms geared towards a synthetic adequation and affirmation, then, they now indicate a 'jamming' of the earlier structural/figural 'mechanics' of affirmation. In *The Ultimate Good Luck* the dialectical 'progress' made towards a potentially exploratory postmodern ontology followed the fairly clear lines of the sympathy/responsibility dialectics, culminating in: 'with her close to him, his

cheek on the cold glass, he felt himself fully located for once, and in a world in which time couldn't pass' and 'He'd see Sonny one more time because he still had the responsibility to console. But he didn't love Sonny. And sometime in the afternoon he'd get on the plane with Rae, then that would be all that mattered anymore, an intimacy that didn't need an outside frame'(p.161) respectively. In 'Sweethearts' the ontological again shadows these same significances, but to an opposite end: paralysis and an increased dissociation.

If we follow Russell's responses to Bobby through the text we find, above all, a strong sense of ambivalence running under the dialogue and under Russell's reflections on their relationship to one another. On the surface Russell sets himself up as almost a foil to Bobby - this is why he at first sight seems so similar to Quinn who is far more straightforwardly defined in opposition to the object of *his* problematic sympathies and responsibilities, namely Sonny. But underneath this surface we can identify several subtle indications that such a simple, dialectical formula is inadequate, is in fact being consistently subverted, and it is in this subversion of apparent oppositions, of the seemingly straightforward binary relation between lucky and luckless, free and imprisoned, innocent and criminal, that the paralysis of *The Ultimate Good Luck's* dynamic of adequation resides.

The first hint of a 'collapsing' or eliding of these oppositions occurs when Russell first comments on his relationship with Bobby:

Arlene and I had been together almost a year. She had divorced Bobby long before...She and Bobby had been childhood sweethearts and run crazy for fifteen years. But when I came into the picture, things with Bobby were settled, more or less. No one had hard feelings left, and when he came around I didn't have any trouble with him. We had things we talked about - our pasts, our past troubles. It was not the worst you could hope for.(p.62)

There are two things here which disturb the predominant tone of emotional superficiality - the first only becomes clear later in the story, namely the fact that Russell is lying when he claims that 'No one had hard feelings left', and the second again depends upon subsequent information - namely a repeated identifying of the past (Russell's) with 'troubles'. Taken together and read in the

light of the later information which 'charges' their at first latent significances, these facts can be regarded as understated 'signposts' to what becomes an ever more clear reading of the relationship between the two men as, not an oppositional encoding of being, but a 'doubling' of apparently disparate codes. Ford uses the fact of Russell's narrative unreliability to endue the 'surface' code of his binary relation to Bobby with a powerfully subversive irony, an irony darkened and strengthened by an undercurrent of ambiguous 'past troubles'.

These early 'hints' are strengthened at several key points in the narrative, points where the suspicion of unreliability is most acute and where, as a direct result, the notion of 'past troubles' takes on a colour which threatens to shade our unclear picture of an earlier Russell all but indistinguishably into our picture of Bobby. This 'shading' begins with a fairly imprecise suggestiveness:

He stared out the back window for a long time and then he sniffed and nodded. 'You have to face that empty moment, Russ.' He cut his eyes at me. 'How often have you done that?'  
'Russ's done that, Bob,' Arlene said. 'We've all done that now. We're adults.'(p.64)

Russell's unwillingness to answer Bobby's question, and Arlene's consequent defusing and 'levelling' of it is telling, and the sense of a 'doubling' which Russell is extremely reluctant to acknowledge gets clearer as the narrative proceeds:

Bobby ran his hands back through his hair and stared up at the ceiling. 'Okay,' he said, 'here's the awful criminal now, ready for jail.' He looked at us then, and he looked wild, as wild and desperate as I have ever seen a man look. And it was not for no reason.  
'That's off the wall,' Arlene said. 'That's just completely boring. I'd never be married to a man who was a fucking criminal.' She looked at me, but Bobby looked at me too.(p.65)

Here again a seemingly straightforward passage carries a great deal of ambiguity. Arlene's rejection of Bobby's criminality is followed immediately by the focusing of both her and Bobby's attention onto Russell, for no obvious reason. This apparently inconsequential aside by Russell is suddenly charged with both menace and accusation however in the very next paragraph which also closes with an (obviously parallel) image of his being 'watched', though now by nothing less than a security camera:

'Somebody ought to come take her away,' Bobby said. 'You know that, Russell? Just put her in a truck and take her away. She always has such a wonderful fucking outlook. You wonder how she got in this fix here.' He looked around the little kitchen, which was shabby and white. At one time Arlene's house had been a jewelry store, and there was a black security camera above the kitchen door, though it wasn't connected now.(pp.65-6)

The growing sense of doubleness seen in these ambiguous hints at an eliding of identities, of codes of conduct and hence being, continues with Russell's interpretation of a look from Bobby as being a look from 'a man who knows half of something and who is supposed to know everything', where Bobby is 'halved' as it were, the other 'half' being Russell, his nemesis and 'replacement' in the life of Arlene. The 'doubling' continues and takes on further menace when Bobby pulls his gun in the car outside the jail. Ford re-unites at this point the idea of a troubled past and a typically self-protective disclaimer from Russell:

'Is it a gun?' Cherry said.

'No, sweetheart,' I said, 'it's not.' I pushed the gun down on the floor under my foot. I did not know if it was loaded, and I hoped it wasn't. I wanted Bobby out of the car then. I have had my troubles, but I am not a person who likes violence or guns.(p.73)

The new association here of 'troubles' with something criminal, even violent (the 'but' is highly revealing, as is Russell's unsurprized, familiar handling of the potentially murderous situation when the gun is pulled) almost completes Russell's unwilling merging with the darker side of Bobby, but when the 'completion' does come it is, interestingly, not simply a 'merging' of past with present, but a 'bonding' which, in its immediacy, echoes clearly, if ironically, the 'bonding' which reconciles Quinn and Rae, though for Russell and Bobby it signifies a bonding in failure, in lucklessness, not in adequation and potentiality:

'Maybe I oughta run for it,' Bobby said...eager for things to happen to him. Suddenly he grabbed both my arms and pushed me back against the door and pushed his face right up to my face. 'Fight me,' he whispered and smiled a wild smile. 'Knock the shit out of me. See what they do.' I pushed against him, and for a moment he held me there, and I held him, and it was as if we were dancing without moving...and I knew what he wanted was for me not to let him go, and for all this to be a dream he could forget about.

'What're you doing?' Arlene said, and she turned around and glared at us. She was mad, and she wanted Bobby to be in jail now.

'Are you kissing each other?' she said. 'Is that what you're doing? Kissing good-bye?'

'We're kissing each other, that's right,' Bobby said. 'That's what we're doing. I always wanted to kiss Russell. We're queers.' He looked at her then, and I know he wanted to say something more to her, to tell her that he hated her or that he loved her or wanted to kill her or that he was sorry. But he couldn't come to the words for that.(p.74)

Whereas sympathy and responsibility were dialectically set out as the mechanisms for re-connection, for an ontological re-orientation in *The Ultimate Good Luck*, then, the same themes are purposely collapsed or elided in 'Sweethearts': the object of both becomes one with the subject, sympathy becomes self-deception, responsibility becomes self-protection. Once the irony of this narrative inversion becomes clear (and it is subtly disguised by Ford, leaving only a vague, unfocused sense of dis-ease and distrust) the final paragraph of the story, ostensibly paralleling Quinn's code of 'Good Conduct' but in fact, through hints and concealments, functioning as above all a cry for release (Russell is alone: "we should open up some emotional distance"(p.75) Arlene tells him once Bobby is gone, and there is, in the light of the 'doubling' that has gone before an immense amount of concealed pathos and regret in his final 'coda' on love) effectively lays waste the 'mechanical' affirmations of *The Ultimate Good Luck*:

'We don't know where any of this is going, do we?' she said, and she squeezed my hand tight.

'No,' I said. And I knew that was not a bad thing at all, not for anyone, in any life.

'You're not going to leave me for some other woman, now, are you? You're still my sweetheart. I'm not crazy, am I?'

'I never thought that,' I said.

'It's your hole card, you know,' Arlene said. 'You can't leave twice. Bobby proved that.' She smiled at me again.

And I knew she was right about that, though I did not want to hear about Bobby anymore for a while. He and I were not alike...though I knew, then, how you became a criminal in the world and lost it all. Somehow, and for no apparent reason, your decisions got tipped over and you lost your hold. And one day you woke up and you found yourself in the very situation you said you would never ever be in, and you did not know what was most important to you anymore. And after *that*, it was all over. And I did not want that to happen to me - did not, in fact, think it ever would. I knew what love was about. It was about not giving trouble or inviting it. It was about not leaving a woman for the thought of another one. It was about never being in that place you said you'd never be in. And it was not about being alone. Never that. Never that.(p.78)

After this passage the structuring of adequation can no longer rely on a simple 'foil' for 'lucklessness' as Quinn is for Sonny and as Russell would have us believe he is for Bobby. From now on in Ford's fiction the 'relation to the luckless', (first articulated in *The Ultimate Good Luck* but finally unconvincingly worked out through its figural and typological determinism) becomes *internalized*, becomes a condition (or grammatical 'form') of life.

Russell closes his narrative with the spectre of aloneness, an aloneness which, as is clear from Ford's earlier fiction, means not just simple solitude or loneliness, but a debilitating, dissociating incompleteness of being. It is the same spectre which haunts Carver's *Cathedral* in images such as the peat-bog corpse of 'Preservation', in Nelson's threat in 'Vitamins' ("It ain't going to do no good! Whatever you do, it ain't going to help none!"(p.364)), and in Myer's inertia, even helplessness, at the close of 'The Compartment':

He leaned against the seat and closed his eyes. The men went on talking and laughing. Their voices came to him as if from a distance. Soon the voices became part of the train's movements - and gradually Myer's felt himself being carried, then pulled back, into sleep.(p.330)

And it is precisely here that both Frank Bascombe's narrative, and the voices of Carver's *Elephant*, begin.

### Notes to Chapter Three

- 1 Peter Currie, 'The Eccentric Self: Anti-Characterization and the Problem of the Subject in American Postmodernist Fiction', in *Contemporary American Fiction*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury and Sigmund Ro (London, 1987), pp.53-71 (p.64).
- 2 'The Eccentric Self', p.59.
- 3 Richard Ford, *The Ultimate Good Luck* (London, 1990; first published New York, 1981), p.12.
- 4 See I.M. Thacker, 'The Autonomous and the Determined; Perceptions of Historical Consciousness in Recent American Fiction' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1982) and Gerry Brenner, *Concealments and Hemingway's Works* (Columbus, 1983) for comprehensive readings of Ideality in Hemingway's fiction.
- 5 Richard Ford, *A Piece of My Heart* (London, 1987; first published New York, 1976), p.72. See also my reading of 'Bridle' and 'Why Don't You Dance?' where Carver too uses a 'centrifugal' dynamic for epistemic dislocation.
- 6 See Chapter Two, footnote no.20.
- 7 'The Eccentric Self', p.64.
- 8 See Chapter Two, footnotes 37 & 40.
- 9 'The Eccentric Self', p.64.
- 10 See Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York, 1987), p.143. Under the sub-title 'Allegory against itself' McHale writes of Burroughs, though it could be easily adapted to fit Ford's strategy in this fiction, 'the instability of his world blocks our efforts to establish an integrated allegorical interpretation'.
- 11 The motif of 'desacralized' hunting is a recurrent feature of Ford's stories. The hunting episodes such as are found in 'Communist', 'Winterkill' and 'Great Falls' for instance seem consciously 'subversive' of Hemingway. See also my discussion of Carver's 'Nobody Said Anything' in relation to 'Big Two-Hearted River' in Chapter Two.
- 12 The sort of non-place Jayne-Anne Phillips has a map for in her story 'Rayme', *Fast Lanes* (London, 1987), p.29: 'All of us were consulting a series of maps bearing no relation to any physical geography'.
- 13 Richard Ford, 'Going to the Dogs', *Rock Springs* (London, 1988), p.109. Further references in brackets after quotation.
- 14 Richard Ford, 'Rock Springs', *Rock Springs*, pp.18-9. Further references in brackets after quotation.
- 15 Richard Ford, 'Empire', *Rock Springs*, p.158. See also 'Great Falls', *Rock Springs*, p.59: 'it...makes our existence seem like a border between two nothings'.
- 16 See 'The Eccentric Self' for a selection of such postmodern 'lamprooning's' of self-hood, p.65.

- 17 It is not difficult to find similar correlations of the notion of the culturally or ideologically 'ex-centric' with ontological 'ex-centricity' in postmodern theory. Thus Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London, 1988): "The "ex-centric" (be it in class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity) takes on new significance in the light of the implied recognition that our culture is not the homogenous monolith...we might have assumed"(p.12), and Lacan's notion of 'the self's radical ex-centricity to itself' in 'The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious', *Ecrits: A Selection* (London, 1977), p.174. See 'The Eccentric Self' for Currie's commentary on this (p.60).
- 18 See *Philosophical Investigations*, Part 1, Section 269, p.94.
- 19 Handke's figure of the threshold is as appropriate for this reading of Ford as it is for the earlier reading of Carver.
- 20 Richard Ford, 'Sweethearts', *Rock Springs*, pp.62-3. Further references in brackets after quotation.

CHAPTER FOUR

'WHERE DO YOU GO IF YOU'RE ME?': THE RHETORIC OF BEING  
IN *ELEPHANT* AND *THE SPORTSWRITER*

# 1

At the close of Carver's story 'Blackbird Pie' we read:

It could be said, for instance, that to take a wife is to take a history. And if that's so, then I understand that I'm outside history now - like horses and fog. Or you could say that my history has left me. Or that I'm having to go on *without history*. Or that history will now have to do without me - unless my wife writes more letters, or tells a friend who keeps a diary, say. Then, years later, someone can look back on this time, interpret it according to the record, its scraps and tirades, its silences and innuendoes. That's when it dawns on me that autobiography is the poor man's history. And that I am saying goodbye to history. Goodbye, my darling.<sup>1</sup>

And in this passage, a passage so alien in its ambitions to almost anything attempted in previous collections, Carver arguably not only articulates what can now be read as a valedictory summation of the aesthetic impulses and compulsions integral to his fiction, but also articulates an aspiration to and the beginnings of an exploration into new aesthetic territory, an exploration prepared for, as it were, in this collection as a whole. In fact, this passage can be read as representing an aesthetic 'moment' which could be tentatively identified as a 'crossing point' for the new realism in general, a point consonant with Mason's *In Country*, Jayne Anne Phillips' *Machine Dreams*, and more significantly as regards this particular study, *The Sportswriter*. In all of these novels we find the same intimate relations obtaining between self, otherness, history and above all the intractable textuality or the 'fundamental narrative' of life, 'its scraps and tirades, its silences and innuendoes'. And in all of these novels we are left with a simultaneously terrible and liberating 'goodbye to history', to Frank Bascombe's 'thin layer of...what? A film? A residue or skin of all the things you've done and been and said and erred at?',<sup>2</sup> to Sam's laying to rest of her father's 'absent presence', his semiological 'ghost' at the Washington Monument,<sup>3</sup> to the 'Machine Dream' itself with its 'war movie sounds...So gentle it sounds like a song [that] goes on softly as the plane falls, year after year, to earth'.<sup>4</sup>

It is not difficult to locate the traces of these relations in the earlier, 'dirty realist' works of these writers. In texts such as Mason's 'Shiloh'<sup>5</sup> or Phillips' 'Rayme - A Memoir of the Seventies'<sup>6</sup> we see precisely these 'historical' knots of memory, identity and signification that are articulated in this text by Carver. Likewise, in returning to the early novels of Richard Ford and the earlier stories of Carver himself we can see that it is in those texts' treatment of 'history' that the 'engines' of both their dissociative power and their sometimes adequate potential are to be found.

For instance, in *A Piece of My Heart* Newel's complaint that 'Your past is supposed to give you some way of judging things...shouldn't I have *something* besides the assurance that everything will eventually be the same?' is, as has been shown already, a protest against his impotence in constructing a secure, essential identity for himself, an ontological *history* for himself, a memory that doesn't have to seem 'like an account full of the wrong currency', as Ford describes Quinn's self-dissociation in *The Ultimate Good Luck*.<sup>7</sup> On a more general level too, in these novels and in Ford's stories, the 'present' of the narrative is invariably in conflict with a determining past which, in its dissociation from the constructs of self-definition, of identity, becomes figured instead as luck. Identity is predicated on a 'change of luck'; Ford's archetypal fugitives are, above all, attempting to flee into the present. This is not any ahistorical, narrowly existentialist movement however - the sanctuary of the present is never inviolate, rather always laid waste by the marauding 'multiplicity of souls' identity carries with it from the past. The present, in fact, becomes reflexive, a commentary on its own making, Newel's hall of mirrors where 'everything will be the same', Sims' self-created, burning 'wide empire' where he is finally alone 'without a memory of life's having changed in that particular way...removed and afloat, calmed, as if life was far away now, as if blackness was all around, as if stars held the only light'.<sup>8</sup>

In Carver's work also of course we find 'history' as the epicentre of alienation and dissociation. History, context, is almost inevitably deferred - surnames, the meeting places of contextual/historical and individual identity are as often as not

withheld; parents are strangers to their children ('Everything Stuck to Him', 'The Third Thing that Killed My Father Off', 'Nobody Said Anything') and children to their parents ('Why, Honey?', 'The Father', 'The Compartment'). Any apparent 'historical' bonds of understanding formed even between contemporaries are subject to sudden, inexplicable, often terrifying dissolution - 'Tell the Women We're Going' for instance opens with a depiction of an ironically cliched small town 'historical' friendship:

Bill Jamison had always been best friends with Jerry Roberts. The two grew up in the south area, near the old fairgrounds, went through grade school and junior high together, and then went on to Eisenhower, where they took as many of the same teachers as they could manage, wore each other's shirts and sweaters and pegged pants, and dated and banged the same girls - whichever came up as a matter of course.<sup>9</sup>

only to end with a shocking revelation of the brutalities the unknowable 'sub-history' latent in the bland, insouciant male commonplaces of the opening paragraph:

Bill had just wanted to fuck. Or even to see them naked. On the other hand, it was okay with him if it didn't work out.

He never knew what Jerry wanted. But it started and ended with a rock. 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.<sup>10</sup>

Time after time in Carver's stories we see 'history' peel away from characters like a glue perished by circumstance, by semiological confusion and impotence, their selves no longer able to hold together the 'multiplicity of souls' that inhabit the 'I's' tenuous constructions (tenuous grammars) of interpretation and identity.

From what has been argued earlier in this study it is evident that there are also significant similarities in the ways Carver and Ford attempt to progress beyond the constant replaying of these dissociative dynamics. The ways in which, that is, they seek to somehow break the deconstructive axis of history and identity. Thus we can see in any of Carver's 'adequative' stories certain fundamental parallels with Ford's *The Ultimate Good Luck* concerning the structuring of adequation.

For example, in 'Will You Please Be Quiet, Please' we see a clear link between historical and ontological dissociation. Ralph Wyman, having by the 'present' time of the narrative put behind him the previous 'identity' he had as a drunkard, as 'Jackson', finds the historical deconstruction of the securities of his marriage (his wife's confessing to a past infidelity) plunging him directly into 'diffraction of the self, a transgression of the identity principle'; Ralph ends up during his drunken wanderings, his dis-location, in a gambling den, and he joins in, picking up his cards it should be noted 'as he had seen his father do':

In half an hour he had won two hands, and, without counting the small pile of chips in front of him, he thought he must still have fifteen or even twenty dollars. He paid for another drink with a chip and was suddenly aware that he had come a long way that evening, a long way in his life. *Jackson*, he thought. He could be Jackson.<sup>11</sup>

What takes this story beyond this fairly typical evocation of dis-location, disease and dissociation and allies it with *The Ultimate Good Luck* (which also deals with 'historical' dissociation as an index of ontological dis-location of course, though using the wider 'canvas' of a post-Vietnam rather than post-infidelity existence) is not just this deconstructive confusion however. In this respect a far more telling passage occurs immediately after the one cited above:

One man laid down his cards and lit his cigar. He stared at Ralph as he puffed, then shook out the match and picked up his cards again. The dealer looked up, resting his open hands on the table, the black hair very crisp on his dark hands.

'You work here in town?' he said to Ralph.

'I live here,' Ralph said. He felt drained, splendidly empty.

'We playing or not?' a man said. 'Clyde?'

'Hold your water,' the dealer said.

'For Christ's sake,' the man said quietly.

'What did you find out tonight?' the dealer said.

'My wife,' Ralph said. 'I found out.'(pp.178-9)

Here, in a very elliptical way, using Ralph's drunkenness as a vehicle for a skewed syntax and so highly ambivalent signification, Carver first opens the door for Ralph's escape from his sudden alienation. The question 'what did you find out?' is answered with 'my wife', and the doubleness of sense contained in the answer is obvious: Ralph has not only found out about his wife's brief (also drunken) infidelity, he has, far more importantly, in some sense 'discovered' his

wife as a mysterious, potent, 'dramatic' entity; as a human being, in fact. The implication is that at last Ralph will have to come to terms with the vision of Marian he has been disturbed by since their honeymoon, the vision of precisely this un-containable potentiality:

For their honeymoon they drove to Guadalajara, and while they both enjoyed visiting the decayed churches and the poorly lighted museums and the afternoons they spent shopping and exploring in the marketplace, Ralph was secretly appalled by the squalor and open lust he saw and was anxious to return to the safety of California. But the one vision he would always remember and which disturbed him most of all had nothing to do with Mexico. It was late afternoon, almost evening, and Marian was leaning motionless on her arms over the ironwork balustrade of their rented *casita* as Ralph came up the dusty road below...She wore a white blouse with a bright red scarf at her throat, and he could see her breasts pushing against the white cloth. He had a bottle of dark, unlabeled wine under his arm, and the whole incident put Ralph in mind of something from a film, an intensely dramatic moment into which Marian could be fitted but he could not.(p.167)

This suggestion of 'discovery' in its broader, even adequate rather than, as previously, dissociative and alienating sense, is of course fulfilled at the close of the narrative. What we see is a *dénouement* which offers a radical, but very straightforward 'solution' of sorts to the desacralizing of history and hence identity, even being. The 'solution' entails the abandonment of a 'grammatically' constructed, discrete, interpretive history/identity and the acceptance of a 'rhetorical', perhaps terrifying but also liberating re-creating (as opposed to re-playing) of the past, its constructs and disruptions. It is a movement that escapes solipsism and the impulse towards essence through an acceptance of otherness and *différance*, an embracing of the other which is violation of the self, but also liberation of the self. Thus Ralph's 'turning, marveling at the impossible changes he felt moving over him' can quite reasonably take its place alongside Quinn's holding Rae 'erect and cool in his arms...fully located for once, and in a world in which time couldn't pass'. Alongside this moment too we could as easily range the narrator of 'Cathedral's' final acceptance of the otherness represented by the blind guest (who has shared a *history* with the narrator's wife - the reason, along with his blindness, for the narrator's initial distrust of him), an acceptance

that, as in 'A Small, Good Thing', signals an explosion of possibilities, a releasing of epistemic potential, a 'transgression of the identity principle' in a wholly positive, suggestive, adequate form:

His fingers rode my fingers as my hand went over the paper. It was like nothing else in my life up to now...  
...I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything.<sup>12</sup>

Up to a point marked roughly by *The Ultimate Good Luck* in Ford's work and the stories mentioned above in Carver's, we can identify a definite attempt to escape both the complacencies and inevitable dissociations of essentialist constructs of history/identity through an almost dialectical progression: otherness is not escaped through solipsism and Idealism (only ever a partial and evasive defence) but rather embraced into a *dynamic* as opposed to a monolith of identity, of being in time.

As has already been noted however, this exploding of the claustrophobic tensions of the essence-history-identity matrix is not sustained by either writer - it is itself pushed beyond its own limits. The adequate 'resolutions' of *The Ultimate Good Luck*, 'Will You Please Be Quiet, Please', 'Cathedral' and even 'A Small, Good Thing' can, in the light of several of the texts that follow them, be seen as offering something akin to a general *typology* of 'making the shock of connection across the prised-apart worlds' of their fractured, multiplistic, multivalent postmodern realities. Each of these texts undoubtedly reaches towards a vision of being which rather than protecting a mythic, unsustainable essence, inevitably dissociative once deconstructed, actually offers itself up to deconstruction through an acceptance of a reality of being, an ontology, which is irreducibly plural, inessential, 'potentially catastrophic' and terrifying but by the same token potentially expansive and liberating. In figuring this adequation as *physically* relational however, the adequate movement can only appear in the rhetoric of the texts as a *type* of a more fundamental epistemological dynamic. With 'Sweethearts' Ford begins a highly significant movement away from this

typological 'shock of connection', a movement towards exploring the more intricate adequate dynamics of rhetorical self-hood. Consequently, with *The Sportswriter*, the typological adequate rhetoric of *The Ultimate Good Luck* is moved inwards to become an autobiographical adequate rhetoric - the rhetorical self ceases to occur simply as a dialectical component of adequation, of re-connection, and occurs as a site in itself for the outworking of adequate dialectics (and a similar movement can be traced between, say, 'A Small, Good Thing' and 'Blackbird Pie'). In both Ford's novel and Carver's final collection of stories the 'realist' fictional text characteristically ceases to function as a structural *occasion* for a representative adequation, as a *type* of postmodern mimesis, and *becomes* that rhetorical adequation, becomes in itself a postmodern mimetic dynamic.

The 'history' we find in both texts, of course, is 'the poor man's history', is autobiography. Both texts locate themselves then at the crux of the problematics regarding history, textuality, identity and essence which have been typologically wrestled with in earlier fictions. Here however there is no resort to a 'structural' salvation - otherness (or more accurately *différance*) is now as much an inner as an external reality, inhabits memory as much as circumstance, love as much as luck. Each text not only addresses but, through its rhetorical explorations actually consists of the dynamics of textual being, postmodern self-hood, and hence enacts rather than simply figures a postmodern mimesis and adequation.

There is of course an apparent paradox inherent in the above contention. If the question of history is, in all these texts, so fundamentally and inextricably bound up with those texts' problematics of identity, how is the 'goodbye to history', our departure point for interpreting the textual enactments of these problematics, to be read other than as a retreat from the very textualizing of being it is here seen as consummating for postmodern realism? Certainly this 'goodbye' involves a negation; but not necessarily a negation of textuality, of the ultimately reflexive awareness of the 'fundamental narrative' which is the 'real' of

this new realism, however closely 'history' in this sense and textuality are obviously entwined in the fiction (whether the cultural/ideological histories of Abish, Mason and Phillips or the 'personal' histories of Handke, Ford and Carver). Rather it is a negation of the 'history of subjects', history as 'the metaphysical enclosure'. Thus Currie's comments on the negation involved in de-centring 'the concept "Man"' can apply equally well to the negation involved in 'saying goodbye to history', to autobiography, to the 'metaphysical enclosure' of the constructed, always historical, text of self-hood:

Negation...implies a correlative positive belief in the necessity for disbelief. Postmodern fiction and post-structuralist criticism may well have displaced or decentred the concept 'Man', but we can no sooner dispense with the category of the subject than step outside the metaphysical enclosure; the ideological position of the subject can only be unsettled, reconstituted and resituated. This radical decentring does not aim at further dehumanizing an already degraded and threatened race, even if it records that degradation, but rather at freeing the subject from illusory notions of 'the self', 'the individual' and, in terms of fiction, the psychologism of the sovereign subject-character.<sup>13</sup>

Arguably, then, we see in the journey towards 'negation' in 'Blackbird Pie', not a capitulation in the face of ambiguity, deferment and dissociation, but a 'stepping out', a breaking free of 'the metaphysical enclosure'. Precisely the same can be said of *The Sportswriter* and in moving between these two texts, and the text of *Elephant* as a collection, it is arguably possible to delineate the broad dimensions of a common, if unstated and certainly unprogrammable, re-casting and releasing not only of postmodern reflexivity, but also, rather ironically, the realist heritage with it. Both 'traditions' of course offer their own form of 'metaphysical enclosure', whether the enclosure is walled by mirrors or windows. Carver and Ford's earlier attempts at 'stepping out' also involved in some senses the construction of, admittedly less metaphysical, but equally enclosing, parameters - typological and structural dialectics (though dialectical resolution is significantly 'exploded' in 'A Small, Good Thing' and 'Sweethearts'). Not surprisingly, therefore, we see in 'Blackbird Pie', which in many ways 'distills' the 'negation' in question, an almost systematic engagement with all these problematics of 'enclosure', these engagements meshing with and echoing the

more isolated and the more extensively constructed engagements of *Elephant* and *The Sportswriter* respectively. Obviously, at the root of these engagements is the question of textuality, and indeed, this is where Carver's narrator begins:

It was a thick envelope, but not so thick it couldn't be pushed under the door. My name was written on the envelope, and what was inside purported to be a letter from my wife. I say 'purported' because even though the grievances could only have come from someone who'd spent twenty-three years observing me on an intimate, day-to-day basis, the charges were outrageous and completely out of keeping with my wife's character. Most important, however, the handwriting was not my wife's handwriting. But if it wasn't her handwriting, then whose was it?<sup>14</sup>

This first paragraph of 'Blackbird Pie' is littered with both direct and indirect engagements with the sorts of 'metaphysical enclosures' discussed above: the letter from his wife that the narrator receives resists 'closure' on at least two fundamental counts - firstly it is not in his wife's handwriting, secondly its charges are 'outrageous and completely out of keeping with [his] wife's character'. At once, then, the inherently ambiguous nature of textuality is foregrounded, not simply to unsettle the 'metaphysical enclosure' of 'realism', but more importantly the enclosures of *identity* which textuality, whether representational or reflexive, concretizes. This text is *ontologically* indeterminate - it resists both stable referentiality (its 'window' onto the narrator's character is, we are told, distorted) and reflexivity (it can hardly function as a mirror of anything, least of all its creator since its author is unknown). The point of all this, the point of structuring a fiction around such a 'mutant' text, is, working with the concept of disrupted 'enclosures', less obscure than it might otherwise seem. History, the most ubiquitous of all 'metaphysical enclosures', is linked explicitly by Carver to the textual enigma of the letter. A distinct sense of narrative unreliability is set against an elaborate, almost psychotic, assertion of reliability by the narrator. The disruptive, identity-threatening, epistemological category-denying text is conveniently lost, then offered back to us as memory. It has been *enclosed*, then, by this ever more dubious narrator, like his possessions ('I usually don't throw anything away'), his knowledge, his life-support system of facts, his security of

being; all enclosed like 'the famous four and twenty that were set before the king':

I wish now I'd kept the letter, so I could reproduce it down to the last comma, the last uncharitable exclamation point. The tone is what I'm talking about now, not just the content. But I didn't keep it, I'm sorry to say. I lost it, or else misplaced it. Later, after the sorry business I'm about to relate, I was cleaning out my desk and may have accidentally thrown it away - which is uncharacteristic of *me*, since I usually don't throw anything away.

In any case, I have a good memory. I can recall every word of what I read. My memory is such that I used to win prizes in school because of my ability to remember names and dates, inventions, battles, treaties, alliances, and the like. I always scored highest on factual tests, and in later years, in the 'real world', as it's called, my memory stood me in good stead. For instance, if I were asked right now to give the details of the Council of Trent or the Treaty of Utrecht, or to talk about Carthage...I could do so...Thermopylae, Shiloh, or the Maxim gun. Easy. Tannenburg? Simple as blackbird pie. The famous four and twenty that were set before the king.(pp.91-2)

Not surprisingly, such a move simply confirms an already broadly hinted at narrative unreliability:

Things stick in my head. I remember. So when I say I can re-create the letter - the portion which I read which catalogues the charges against me - I mean what I say.

In part, the letter went as follows...(pp.92-3)

This selectivity in the narrator's 'reproduction' of the letter ('In *part*') brings us roughly to the point reached by Ford in 'Sweethearts', again a story which sets the notion of enclosure (it is, after all, a narrative built around the taking of a man to prison) into figural play. Narrative unreliability works in both texts as an index of 'historical enclosure', a means of re-writing, or at least substantially editing, the texts of self-hood. 'Instead of beginning to read the letter through, from start to finish, or even starting at the point where I'd stopped earlier', Carver's narrator tells us:

I took pages at random and held them under the table lamp, picking out a line here and a line there. This allowed me to juxtapose the charges made against me until the entire indictment...took on quite another character - one more acceptable, since it had lost its chronology and, with it, a little of its punch.(p.100)

But where 'Sweethearts' ends 'Blackbird Pie' effectively begins. While Ford's text closes on a hint that the 'enclosing' impulse towards protection, towards

security, can numb the self not just to a personal history, to an 'historic' other or *différance* that is the past self, but also, unwittingly, to otherness in general (thus the ironic, already defeated, 'never alone, never that'), Carver's text uses this dissociative 'spillage' not as a conclusive, if ironic, 'moral', but as a catalyst for a further broadening of the tensions and problematics being explored:

I don't know what else to say in regard to this matter of the handwriting. How much more can I say and still retain credibility? We were alone in the house. No one else - to my knowledge, anyway - was in the house and could have penned the letter. Yet I remain convinced to this day that it was not her handwriting that covered the pages of the letter. After all, I'd been reading my wife's handwriting since before she was my wife. As far back as what might be called our prehistory days - the time she went away to school as a girl, wearing a grey-and-white school uniform...I would estimate...that I received seventeen hundred or possibly eighteen hundred and fifty handwritten letters from her, not to mention hundreds, maybe thousands, more informal notes ('On your way home, please pick up dry cleaning, and some spinach pasta from Corti Bros').(p.95)

What we see in the above passage is a fundamental departure from the adequate resolutions of earlier stories. Previously, for both Carver and Ford, love has functioned as an essentially wordless potentiality in the texts. The repetitiveness of the formulation 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Love' foregrounds not only the textualizing of love, but also the irony inherent in discursive attempts to textualize and hence 'enclose' love. Thus the wordlessness of Ralph Wyman, the 'It's really something' of 'Cathedral'. In Ford's work too of course we find the wordless communion of 'the ultimate good luck'. With 'A Small, Good Thing' and 'Sweethearts' the 'release' into wordlessness begins to break down, but it is only with such later texts as 'Blackbird Pie' and Ford's *The Sportswriter* that a deeper, richer complexity is achieved. Whereas in Carver's earlier stories love could be wordless and so escape the 'metaphysical enclosure' of definition (again, one thinks of 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Love'), now the unspeakable itself is opened up and seen to be yet another enclosure; love is still not 'grammatical', is not definable, but it does have its rhetoric, its texts, its own historicity.

At this point in the story therefore we find the adequate movement which seemed all but resolved in a story such as 'Cathedral' now, after the 'preparatory' restlessness of 'A Small, Good Thing', exploded into discursive struggle, into semiological multivalence, once again. Communion, adequation, love itself is no longer exempt from the rhetorical 'slipperiness' of 'the fundamental narrative', of textual being - even love has its histories, the 'multiplicity of souls' of *différance*, its deconstructive *traces*. Love too is now deprived of essence, becomes relational, transitive, *textual*. Its own 'metaphysical enclosure', however benign its constructions, however revelatory its 'discovery', is also, in this passage, served notice on. Love, association, is now also to be deconstructed, then. We see here not only a 'transgression of the identity *principle*', but a transgression, an invasion of, identity itself, its 'private language', its honesties and vulnerabilities as well as its dissemblances, its protective 'grammatical' carapaces of illusory essence. Thus, when the narrator offers us 'a kind of abstract' of the letter, we find images of both the former and the latter, both systematic protection of an 'identity principle' ('...withdrawing farther into...a shell...Your "work"') and simple intimacies ('...talcum powder sprayed over the bathroom...The children...the loneliness'(p.100)) scrambled together, deprived of any hierarchy of dissociative effect. The point, it seems, is simply that the metaphorically depicted, solipsistic evasions of intimacy cannot be unproblematically presented as indices of dislocated, dissociative being and hence 'remedied' through the sort of dialectical communion, the *intimacy* (the title of another key story in this collection of course), that we see in 'Cathedral' or Ford's *The Ultimate Good Luck*. Otherness inhabits intimacy too; otherness, or more properly now *différance*, is, we see in these later texts, no longer simply a problem of external relations, but of *inner* dissociation. History, the textualizing of being, is now no longer just a strategy for preserving an embattled, always illusory integrity of self, an 'identity *principle*'; rather it is the very problematic which makes such an integrity impossible in the first place.

History, or textuality, with all its ambiguities, slippages and deferments moves inwards. The textualizing of being is no longer just a strategy for ontological self-preservation, and the abandonment of such self-enclosure is no longer the simple ticket to adequate potentiality we see in 'Will You Please Be Quiet, Please' and *The Ultimate Good Luck*. In fact, there is no such abandonment possible, except in death. The narrator of 'Blackbird Pie', in frantically attempting to contain, to enclose the ambiguities of the letter through editing, 'historical' explanations and 'proofs', simply reveals an even more fundamental ambiguity than the problem of the handwriting - the 'voice' of the letter is remarkably similar to his own narrating, historian's 'voice' ('The time has come and gone for us - us, you and me - to put all our cards on the table. Thee and me. Lancelot and Guinevere. Abélard and Héloïse. Troilus and Cressida. Pyramus and Thisbe. JAJ and Nora Barnacle, etc.'(p.98-9)) and the idiosyncracies of the writer of the letter mirror (very wittily) his own:

Secondly, my wife *never* underlined her words for emphasis. Never. I don't recall a single instance of her doing this - not once in our entire married life, not to mention the letters I received from her before we were married. It would be reasonable enough, I suppose, to point out that it could happen to anyone. That is, anyone could find himself in a situation that is completely atypical and, *given the pressure of the moment*, do something totally out of character and draw a line, the merest *line*, under a word, or maybe under an entire sentence.(p.96)

Identity becomes more fluid here than ever, then. If the 'identity *principle*' is violated, confused and transgressed in the earlier new realism then here the very flux of identity itself (both the narrator's and his wife's) becomes a mixture, a hybrid, a 'multiplicity of souls' in the most fundamental, *intimate* sense possible. Dissociation here begins to shade into more than a hint of madness, of a dissociation not just from a constructed image of self, but from even the most integral, minimal grounds of self-hood. In pulling us back from this conclusion, Carver makes it clear that the confusion, the mystery, is essentially figural; the suspicion of madness, of a schizophrenia of sorts, is a metaphor. As in all Carver's fiction the psychological is primarily a figure for the epistemological, or, as here, the ontological. Therefore just as the reader begins to 'solve' the

mysterious text of the letter in terms of madness, in terms of a psychological dissociation, Carver has the wife actually confront the narrator with the words: "You didn't read my letter, did you? You might have skimmed it, but you didn't read it. Admit it!"(p.102). The important point made by this 'teasing' is simply that the depth of dissociation now being explored cannot be catered for by the figure of a relationship between two people, only by states of mind, of being, which realize an *internal* otherness, an integral *différance*. It is as if Abrams' 'deconstructive angel' is to be figured now not in terms of demonic 'invasion', but of demonic *possession*.

Very interestingly, this key shifting of the history/identity deconstructive matrix inwards can be traced through several other of the stories in *Elephant*. In 'Whoever Was Using This Bed' for instance, we see an 'invasive' mystery (the phone call from and for an unknown stranger) shifting 'historical' conflict ('after Iris and I started living together, my former wife, or else one of my kids, used to call up when we were asleep and want to harangue us'(p.28)) inwards into an alternately very funny and chilling confrontation with the most basic ongoing historical conflict of all - mortality, the *physical* history of the final 'deconstruction':

She takes some of her hair between her fingers. Then she pushes it behind her ear, looks at me, and says, 'Lately I've been feeling this vein in my forehead. It *pulses* sometimes. It throbs. Do you know what I'm talking about? I don't know if you've ever had anything like that. I hate to think about it, but probably one of these days, I'll have a stroke or something. Isn't that how they happen? A vein in your head bursts? That's probably what'll happen to me, eventually. My mother, my grandmother, and one of my aunts died of stroke. There's a history of stroke in my family. It can run in the family, you know. It's hereditary, just like heart disease, or being too fat, or whatever.'(p.34)

There then follows a long litany of the couples' minor ailments, any or all of which could be fatal. Again, as with the evocation of mental illness in 'Blackbird Pie' however, this physical 'alienation' from self is primarily a metaphor, a means of figuring the inescapable intimacy with which the self is bound to otherness, to dissociation, to the deconstructive demon; the intimacy of 'the self's radical ex-centricity to itself' in Lacan's phrase.<sup>15</sup> It is as inescapable a relation as that of

the self to the body and hence to death's 'otherness' and unknowableness. Thus the disease evoked on the physical level is meshed almost seamlessly by Carver into the existential (or ontological) dis-ease evoked first by their post-phone call conversation:

She takes my drink and puts it on the table, next to the phone. She puts her arms around me and holds me and lets her head rest on my shoulder. But here's the thing. What I've just said to her, what I've been thinking about off and on all day, well, I feel as if I've crossed some kind of invisible line. I feel as if I've come to a place I never thought I'd have to come to. And I don't know how I got here. It's a strange place. It's a place where a little harmless dreaming and then some sleepy, early-morning talk has led me into considerations of death and annihilation...

and then by the re-interruption of the mysterious caller:

The phone rings. We let go of each other, and I reach to answer it. 'Hello,' I say.

'Hello, there,' the woman says back.

It's the same woman who called this morning, but she isn't drunk now. At least, I don't think she is; she doesn't sound drunk. She is speaking quietly, reasonably, and she is asking me if I can put her in touch with Bud Roberts. She apologises. She hates to trouble me, she says, but this is an urgent matter. She's sorry for any trouble she might be giving...

...Then it's my turn to talk. This is what I say to her: 'Bud Roberts doesn't live here. He is not at this number, and I don't expect he ever will be. I will never, never lay eyes on this man you're talking about. Please don't ever call here again. Just don't, OK? Do you hear me? If you're not careful, I'll ring your neck for you.'

'The *gall* of that woman,' Iris says.

My hands are shaking. I think my voice is doing things. But while I'm trying to tell all this to the woman, while I'm trying to make myself understood, my wife moves quickly and bends over, and that's it. The line goes dead, and I can't hear anything. (pp.43-4)

At the close of this call and of the story the narrator's 'voice is doing things', he is 'trying to make [himself] understood'; the 'movement' of the story is completed in this overwhelming sense of a loss of semiological and hence self-control, of 'un-selfing' almost; a sense, then, of possession rather than externally figured conflict. The voice on the phone is forgotten and suddenly the narrator is pitted against *himself*. When the line goes dead, when Iris 'pulls the plug', the resonances are not of the 'external' dissociations of a failed marriage with which the narrative opens, but of a figure (a life-support machine) for a more integral dissociation of being itself.<sup>16</sup> Iris wants the narrator to promise to 'pull the plug'

on her if the occasion ever arises. The narrator is unable to give a quick answer (again semiological confusion and impotence dislocates the 'intimacy': 'What am I supposed to say? They haven't written the book on this one yet') and finally "'What about you?'" Iris asks:

She hasn't moved. She's still waiting for her answer...I think about it some more, and then I say what I mean. 'No. Don't unplug me. I don't want to be unplugged. Leave me hooked up just as long as possible...Let me keep going, OK? Right to the bitter end. Invite my friends in to say goodbye. Don't do anything rash.'

'Be serious,' she says. 'This is a very serious matter we're discussing.'

'I am serious. Don't unplug me. It's as simple as that.'

She nods. 'OK, then. I promise you I won't.'(p.41)

In 'Intimacy' too we find an exploration of historicity which moves inwards, though this time it is structured not just on the fact of a past relationship, but primarily on the specific problem of a writer's response to a failed relationship. In other words the 'outer' becomes art, the 'inner' the personal abasement and forgiveness sought by the narrator. Again much is made of a dissociation from self which is represented by a rhetoric of madness: 'You're crazy as a bedbug'(p.46), 'I know why you're here, even if you don't'(p.47), and 'you have yourself confused with somebody else'(p.50) his ex-wife asserts, and the narrator himself admits of his continued one-sided contact with her 'I don't know what I had in mind'(p.45). More important than this vocabulary of dissociation however is the dissociation worked by the fact of *this* story. The narrator is reminded of a moment of 'madness' by his ex-wife, an occasion when she attacked him with a knife, and this, in being ironically linked to memory/history ('something to remember me by') opens up not just a series of problematics relating to his previous re-writing of their shared past, but also of course the problematic of (re-)writing the supposedly cathartic encounter represented by *this*, now narrated, visit:

I should have nicked your arm with it at least. At least that.

Well, you didn't, I say. I thought you were going to cut me with it, but you didn't. I took it away from you.

She says, You were always lucky...Even a little would have been something to remember me by.

I remember a lot, I say...then wish I hadn't.

She says, Amen, brother. That's the bone of contention here, if you hadn't noticed. That's the whole problem. But like I said, in my opinion you remember the wrong things. You remember the low, shameful things. That's why you got interested when I brought up the knife.(p.48)

'Memory', then, is 'the whole problem'. Or rather the (inevitably partial, because textual) making of memory into *history* in the process of its textualization. But if this is 'the whole problem', then there must arise the presumption that this text itself is equally dissociative, regardless of its moment of reconciliation. The text itself therefore now doesn't 'know itself', is 'possessed' by doubleness, by *différance*. The wordlessness of the narrator's abasement is 'violated' by this 'new' text, which, in textualizing, in becoming part of 'the whole problem', becomes reflexive and dissociative ('What am I doing on the floor? I wish I could say...It's crazy, but I'm still on my knees...(p.51)), 'performing' exactly the dissociation being ostensibly confronted and transcended.

In previous stories of Carver's this tension would almost certainly not have surfaced. Wordlessness was previously an end point, never a point of departure for further dissociative and reflexive complexities; in 'Are You A Doctor?' the wordlessness is symptomatic of a conclusive alienation, in 'Cathedral' of a conclusive adequation, but in both cases the limit to the textual exploration is all but identically placed. Here, however, instead of closing the text, the 'moment' of wordlessness actually releases the text into a paradoxical, though kinetic, adequation:

She says, Get up now. What is it? You still want something from me. What do you want? Want me to forgive you? Is that why you're doing this? That's it, isn't it? That's the reason you came all this way. The knife thing kind of perked you up, too. I think you'd forgotten about that. But you needed me to remind you. OK, I'll say something if you'll just go.

She says, I forgive you.

She says, Are you satisfied now? Is that better? Are you happy? He's happy now, she says.

But I'm still there, knees to the floor...

...She moves closer. She's about three inches from my face. We haven't been this close in a long time. I take these little breaths that she can't hear, and I wait. I think my heart slows way down, I think.

She says, You just tell it like you have to, I guess, and forget the rest. Like always. You been doing that for so long now anyway it shouldn't be hard for you.

She says, There, I've done it. You're free, aren't you? At least you think you are anyway. Free at last. That's a joke, but don't laugh. Anyway, you feel better, don't you?(p.52)

The point of acceptance, of understanding which this text has been simultaneously promising and deferring has been finally attained not through wordlessness but an acceptance of the inevitability of being, even at its most 'intimate', becoming textualized since being-in-time is always 'possessed' by *différance*, 'the "reference" within the Now to a past Now'<sup>17</sup>, the awareness of which Carver's narrator terms 'the dark view of things'(p.48). Of course this tentative adequation through acceptance is by its very nature far from absolute or conclusive; 'Free at last. That's a joke' as the narrator's ex-wife puts it. But in using the writer as a figure of an all but universal condition of being - the self-conscious and hence 'historical' self is above all and inescapably a *textualizing* self - the narrative not only locates the 'Derridean' deconstructive angel's dissociative alienations in the nature of being itself, but also the 'Wittgensteinian' *liberation* of otherness, of multiplicity, of the rhetorical release from the 'grammar' of 'knowing' and interpreting, of containing and enclosing. The final movement is a release on a multitude of levels:

So she walks me to the front door, which has been standing open all this while. The door that was letting in light and fresh air this morning, and sounds off the street, all of which we had ignored. I looked outside and, Jesus, there's this white moon hanging in the morning sky. I can't think when I've ever seen anything so remarkable. But I'm afraid to comment on it. I am. I don't know what might happen. I might break into tears even. I might not understand a word I'd say.(p.53)

Likewise, in 'Blackbird Pie' we find alienation and release not dialectically separated, but concurrent one with the other. If dissociation is *in* being and not just the external relations of being, then so is the 'negative side' of dissociative otherness, it's *release*. The narrator's confusion and alienation is finally allowed expression through the arrival of horses in the fog around the house, and more importantly that expression for once free of the constructs, the historical doubling that has so far hallmarked his enclosing narrative. Now we find the admission 'I don't know how to say this other than it was'(p.101), an admission and acceptance of defeat that allows for the beginning not of any typological,

structural reconciliation, but of a released 'symbolic energy', figured by a 'surge of power' from the mysterious *irreducible* fact of the horses, their irreducibility opening the door to his first unprotected, un-qualified, un-textualized confrontation with the otherness that is his estranged wife (his 'history'):

'What is it?' I said to my wife. 'For God's sake, what's happening here, anyway?'

She didn't answer. The horse moved a few steps but continued pulling and eating the grass. The other horse was munching grass as well. My wife moved with the horse, hanging on to its mane. I put my hand against the horse's neck and felt a surge of power run up my arm to the shoulder. I shivered. My wife was still crying. I felt helpless, but I was scared, too.

'Can you tell me what's going on?' I said. 'Why are you dressed like this? What's that suitcase doing on the front porch? Where did these horses come from? For God's sake, can you tell me what's happening?'

My wife began to croon to the horse. Croon! Then she stopped and said, 'You didn't read my letter, did you? You might have skimmed it, but you didn't read it. Admit it!'(pp.101-2)

It is as a direct consequence of this that the narrator can finally realize that his enclosures have failed him, a realization that compromises and deconstructs his securities of being, though the realization is not a wholly destructive one. In the end we find him 'stepping outside' the 'metaphysical enclosure' of his stiflingly textualized life, into the 'far more' of that deconstruction's release from knowledge into mystery, from 'grammar' into 'rhetoric', from 'history' into time, from a protective, enclosing reflexivity to 'horses and fog':

There's still the question of the handwriting. That's a bewilderment. But the handwriting business isn't the important thing. of course. How could it be after the consequences of the letter? Not the letter itself but the things I can't forget that were in the letter. No, the letter is not paramount at all - there's far more to this than somebody's handwriting. The 'far more' has to do with subtle things. It could be said, for instance, that to take a wife is to take a history. And if that's so, then I understand that I'm outside history now - like horses and fog.(p.109)

2

Turning from *Elephant* to *The Sportswriter* we again find a strategic reliance both on the psychological dissociation manipulated by Carver in 'Blackbird Pie' and the figure of the writer-narrator so central to 'Intimacy'. The psychological figuring of Frank Bascombe's dreaminess, for instance, can in many ways be seen

as the rhetorical apotheosis of Carver's hints at a dissociative 'losing' of self which, as we have seen, run through all the texts so far discussed in this context.

Also, as regards the figural use of a writer-narrator, Bascombe (allowed the discursive freedom of the novel) is a perfect vehicle for exploring the implications raised by Carver's 'model' textualizers, the 'model' historians of 'Blackbird Pie' and 'Intimacy'. Bascombe, in being an ex-literary writer as well as a sportswriter offers an analytical as well as figural exploration of the textualizing impulse and its paradoxical 'angel' of dissociation and release:

Why, you might ask, would a man give up a promising literary career - there were some good notices - to become a sportswriter?

It's a good question. For now let me say only this: if sportswriting teaches you anything, and there is much truth to it as well as plenty of lies, it is that for your life to be worth anything you must sooner or later face the possibility of terrible, searing regret. Though you must also manage to avoid it or your life will be ruined.

I believe I have done these two things. Faced down regret. Avoided ruin. And I am still here to tell about it.(p.10)

But above all what links *The Sportswriter* to the stories of Carver's just analyzed is a shared dependence on the rhetoric of history as a framework for these paradoxical dissociations and liberations. We see this in Bascombe's invocation of regret, a 'double' invocation of course - sportswriting both exposes the self to 'the possibility of terrible, searing regret', to history as dissociation, but also provides a means of 'facing down regret', of a 'goodbye to history', even. In fact, the theme of sportswriting in this novel is arguably nothing less than the theme of history in the broad sense in which it is found in these later postmodern realist texts. When Bascombe offers us two basically contradictory (again, paradoxical) 'versions' of his 'metaphysics' of the work of sportswriting, it is not difficult to recognize an opposition, or tension, which has become very familiar through not only this concluding chapter, but, expressed with different vocabularies, the whole of this thesis; the tension, that is, between historical/ontological enclosure ('grammar', 'transcendental form') and historical/ontological release ('rhetoric' or 'deconstructive grammar', 'transitive

being'). Bascombe, then, firstly offers us this 'moral' derived from his adopted world of sportswriting:

Everyone should live alone at some time in a life. Not like when you're a kid, summers, or in a single dorm room in some crappy school. But when you're grown up. *Then* be alone. It can be all right. You can end up more within yourself, as the best athletes are, which is worth it. (A basketball player who goes for his patented outside jumper becomes nothing more than the simple wish personified that the ball go in the hole.)(pp.12-3)

Just one paragraph later however we find this moral of being 'within oneself' challenged head on by how he does in fact 'face down regret' in his textualizing world:

Very early you come to the realization that nothing will ever take you away from yourself. But in these literal and anonymous cities of the nation, your Milwaukees... your Detroits, even your New Jerseys, something hopeful and unexpected can take place. A woman I met at the college where I briefly taught once told me I had too many choices, that I was not driven enough by dire necessity. But that is just an illusion and her mistake. Choices are what we all need. And when I walk out into the bricky warp of these American cities, that is exactly what I feel. Choices aplenty. Things I don't know anything about but might like are here, possibly waiting for me. Even if they aren't. The exhilaration of a new arrival. Good light in a restaurant that especially pleases you. A cab driver with an interesting life history to tell. The casual, lilting voice of a woman you don't know, but that you're allowed to listen to in a bar you've never been in, at a time when you would otherwise have been alone. These things are waiting for you. And what could be better? More mysterious? More worth anticipating? Nothing. Not a thing.(pp.13-4)

Now 'nothing will ever take you away from yourself' but the Ideality of self-containment could not be more categorically rejected. The 'Ideal', 'essentialist' impulse to (self-) containment is counterpointed against the relative ('nothing will ever take you away from yourself. *But...*') transitive, inessentialist 'moral' of 'choices', 'The exhilaration of a new arrival', anticipation, mystery, possibility.

The grounds of this tension are of course of far more significance than a simple critique of sportswriting. Ford very early on locates this constantly recurring enclosure/release tension or dynamic in the very being of Bascombe. It is a tension which his choice of career simply mirrors; a tension which simultaneously threatens to dissociate and promises to liberate at the most

fundamental, ontological level. Bascombe, on meeting X, his ex-wife, at the cemetery, wonders:

what my own voice will sound like. Will it be a convincing truth-telling voice? Or a pseudo-sincere, phony, ex-husband one that will stir up trouble? I have a voice that is really mine, a frank, vaguely rural voice more or less like a used car salesman: a no-frills voice that hopes to uncover simple truth by a straight-on application of the facts. I used to practice it when I was in college. 'Well, okay, look at it this way,' I'd say right out loud. 'All right, all right.' 'Yeah, but look here.' As much as any, this constitutes my sportswriter voice, though I have stopped practicing by now.(p.17)

In other words, the tension between a containing, enclosing impulse and an unstated but implicit disruption 'pollutes' even Bascombe's narratorial index of self-hood: his voice. 'I have a voice that is really mine', we read, and then discover that in fact this is also a voice that can be categorized (immediately implying a hidden multiplicity) as his 'sportswriter voice' which, moreover, he used to *practice*.

Authenticity, or security of being, is once more an Ideality which is subtly but unmistakably subverted, deconstructed. The impression is further strengthened just a little later when Bascombe again ambiguously connects authenticity of voice/being with performance: 'I have spoken in a voice which pleases me, a voice that is really mine'(p.18). Furthermore, in a nearby passage he offers us a revealing insight into his ex-wife's evaluation of his character, his nature, which, familiarly by now, constructs an opposition (even, wittily, a 'civil war') between enclosure ( the 'straightforward', the empirical) and multiplicity (the ambiguous, the semiological):

She also told me, without being particularly critical, that she considered me a loner, which surprised me too. She said that it was a mistake to have made as few superficial friends as I have done in my life, and to have concentrated only on the few things I have concentrated on - her, for one. My children, for another. Sportswriting and being an ordinary citizen. This did not leave me well enough armored for the unexpected, was her opinion. She said this was because I didn't know my parents very well, had gone to a military school, and grown up in the south, which was full of betrayers and secret-keepers and untrustworthy people, which I agree is true, though I never knew any of them. All that originated, she said, with the outcome of the Civil War. It was much better to have grown up, she said, as she did, in a place with no apparent character, where there is nothing ambiguous around

to confuse you or complicate things, where the only thing anybody ever thought seriously about was the weather.(pp.18-9)

The 'Civil War' linkage of history and ontological dissociation is perhaps the most significant of all the figures which occur in these early examples of structural tension since it makes the first explicit link of this kind, though of course all of Bascombe's dissociations are depicted in the context of at least a personal history.<sup>18</sup> It is significant because it grounds these ontological tensions firmly in a context of textuality *per se* rather than simply a mode of textualizing experience, namely sportswriting. In other words, sportswriting is not a luminous metaphor, it is a problematic, a locus of conflict, not a cohering index. Ford has Bascombe open the second chapter, after this layering of the principle of conflict, with a discourse not on sportswriting, but explicitly on history:

All we really want is to get to the point where the past can explain nothing about us and we can get on with life. Whose history can ever reveal very much? In my view Americans put too much emphasis on their pasts as a way of defining themselves, which can be death-dealing...

...My own history I think of as a postcard with changing scenes on one side but no particular or memorable messages on the back. You can get detached from your beginnings, as we all know, and not by any malevolent designs, just by life itself, fate, the tug of the ever present. The stamp of our parents on us and of the past in general is, to my mind, overworked since at some point we are whole and by ourselves upon the earth, and there is nothing that can change that for better or worse, and so we might as well think about something more promising.

I was born into an ordinary, modern existence in 1945, an only child to decent parents of no irregular point of view, no particular sense of their *place* in history's continuum, just two people afloat on the world and expectant like most others in time, without a daunting conviction about their own consequence. This seems like a fine lineage to me still.(p.30)

The conflict, the dynamic which runs through and animates *The Sportswriter* is a problematic not, finally, of perception, though perception is used as its index, but of being. Textuality in this problematic is, as it is in 'Intimacy' or 'Blackbird Pie', underneath as well as in ways of telling, 'possessing' being as much as the expression and the constructions of being. Thus the evasions, omissions and paradoxes inherent in Bascombe's use of sportswriting as an epistemic 'grammar' for being-in-the-world are one and the same as those inherent in his *personal* 'grammar' or index of being-in-time, his own *history*; in exploring the

problematics of the former (which structure the text) we explore the underlying dynamics of the latter.

The use of conflict as structure is all but continuous in Ford's novel, but three places in the text can perhaps be isolated as structural 'keystones' in Bascombe's own 'bricky warp' of 'choices aplenty', of 'new arrivals' and new voices.<sup>19</sup> The first of these is his meeting with his wife in the cemetery, the second his interviewing of Herb Wallagher, the paraplegic ex-football star, and the third his relationship with Vicki Arcenault culminating in the Easter Sunday they spend at her parents' home.

Bascombe's meeting with X at the cemetery is the substance, of course, of much of the first chapter and since all of the passages analyzed above (the very last excluded) are also drawn from this part of the book it is perhaps hardly surprising that the conflicts inherent in those passages in many ways mirror, amplify and comment on tensions and conflicts figured in this relationship. The account of their meeting also sets up a very significant pattern to the tensions and conflicts already discussed however, namely a pattern of paradoxical *failure*. As if in direct opposition to *The Ultimate Good Luck*, Ford here uses a relationship not to reconcile the historical/ontological tensions common to both novels, but rather to push them into new implications. In this sense the pattern is one of 'failure', then, but it is paradoxical in that it is precisely this continuous 'stepping out' of the dialectical pressure towards a *structural* reconciliation (at every level) that allows the text to begin to escape 'transcendental form' and 'metaphysical enclosure', and that thereby begins to achieve the only tenable postmodern adequation which is the rhetorical release, in Bascombe's phrase, 'to the rest of our lives'(p.25). In a very important sense, therefore, it can be said that *The Sportswriter* is a novel of failure, just as 'Blackbird Pie' is a story of failure. Beginning with this opening meeting at the cemetery and moving through the two other key episodes mentioned, the terms of that paradoxical

failure (and what else could a truly postmodern adequation be but a paradoxical failure?) can arguably be drawn out of this subtle and complex text.

We can characterize this paradoxical failure as found in this first chapter as being, broadly, the failure of classical/Modernistic literature. The failure, that is, of a certain general mode of textual valorization. Thus Bascombe sets up an explicit opposition between his own textual adequations (sportswriting) and the pretensions of more privileged and self-privileging modes of textualizing existence:

If there's another thing that sportswriting teaches you, it is that there are no transcendent themes in life. In all cases things are here and they're over, and that has to be enough. The other view is a lie of literature and the liberal arts, which is why I did not succeed as a teacher, and another reason I put my novel away in the drawer and have not taken it out.(p.22)

This apparently simple opposition is highly problematic however. 'In all cases things are here and they're over' is of course a blatant evasion. Ralph's death, two years gone, is far from 'over' for Bascombe, and in his habitual dreaminess and optimism 'things' are rarely 'here'. The 'unreliability' of the claim operates reflexively too of course - Bascombe is in the very act of narrating a novel, a piece of literature.

This does not negate the failure however, it rather negates Bascombe's alternative and prepares us for *its* failure also. A much more convincing undermining of the valorizing pretensions of 'literature' occurs far less self-consciously (Bascombe himself is here using literature in precisely that valorizing way which he has just repudiated) as the focal point of Bascombe and X's meeting:

She is waiting for me to say a word now, to liberate us from that old misery of memory and life...And I am her boy, happy to do that very thing - let my optimism win back a day or at least the morning or a moment when it all seems lost to grief. My one redeeming strength of character may be that I am good when the chips are down. With success I am worse.

'Why don't I read a poem,' I say, and smile a happy old rejected suitor's smile...

...Last year I brought Housman's 'To An Athlete Dying Young' and made the mistake of not reading it over beforehand. I had not read it since I was in college, but the title made me remember it as something that would be good to read. Which it wasn't. If

anything, it was much too literal and dreamily so about real athletes, a subject I have strong feelings about. Ralph in fact had not been much of an athlete. I barely got past 'townsman of a stiller town', before I had to stop and just sit staring at the little headstone of red marble, incised with the little words RALPH BASCOMBE.(p.23)

Ironically, then, the 'word' which is meant to 'liberate us from that old misery of memory and life' plunges them into exactly that. The rhetoric of failure surrounding the remembered episode creates an inevitability of failure - failure is *in* language, we realise, not simply *of* it, or of any particular mode of language, whether speech, literature or sportswriting: Bascombe's 'word...to liberate us' fails, he smiles 'a happy old rejected suitor's smile', 'with success [he is] worse'. And as the above quote suggests, if it is in language, it is in being, and so now there is no escape from this failure, no retreat into the wordless embraces of *The Ultimate Good Luck*; the point of rest is only another text of 'failure', of loss, of 'that old misery of memory and life', the *written* name of their dead son.

Even when the poem changes, then, the failure inevitably remains. Frank produces Roethke's 'meditation, starting it in his 'best, most plausible voice, as if [his] dead son could hear it down below':

X has already begun to shake her head before I am to the second line, and I stop and look to her to see where the trouble is.

She puches out her lower lip and sits her stone. 'I don't like that poem,' she says matter-of-factly.

I knew she would know it and have a strong opinion about it. She is still an opinionated Michigan girl, who thinks about things with certainty and is disappointed when the rest of the world doesn't...I feel tension rising off me like a fever now. It is possible that reading a poem over a little boy who never cared about poems is not a good idea...

...'I shouldn't really say I don't like it,' X says coldly. 'I just don't believe it, is all.'

It is a poem about letting the everyday make you happy - insects, shadows, the colour of a woman's hair - something else I have strong beliefs about. 'When I read it, I always think it's me talking,' I say.

'I don't think those things in that poem would make anybody happy. They might not make you miserable. But that's all,' X says and slips down off the stone...She probably has a lesson at seven, or a follow-through seminar, and her mind is ready to be far, far away.(pp.24-5)

The artificial distinction set up by Bascombe between on the one hand a literature of 'transcendent themes' and on the other a literature of transience is, then, taken apart. The failure of textuality *is* textuality; no matter if a particular

text avoids a 'transcendent' valorization, it is still open to 'disbelief' (belief, after all, being what marshalls the 'multiplicity of souls' inhabiting any 'orderly activity', any 'grammar' of meaning), to the *différance* it must also be possessed of.

But if this episode provides a framework of failure for the novel, it also provides a framework for the paradox which 'inhabits' this ontological failure. According to Nietzsche, hope is the first sign of defeat, but for Frank Bascombe, the formula can be reversed. Defeat is the occasion for hope; dissociation and separation the multivalent occasion for release. Bascombe's rejected suitor is, in a darker but also more radically vital sense than he evasively imagines, "released to the rest of [his life]"(p.25):

I hear the bells of St. Leo the Great chime six o'clock, and for some reason I have a feeling I won't see her for a long time, that something is over and something begun, though I cannot tell you for the life of me what those somethings might be.(p.29)

It is an end *and* a beginning, Frank senses, and though he again fails in his prediction that he 'won't see her again for a long time' the peculiar receptivity to anticipation that the prediction embodies now becomes the flawed, unreliable but authentic engine of the novel's own paradoxical liberations which, as we shall see, release *into* failure as much as from it: 'We are having to make everything up now', as Frank puts it, 'since nothing is ours by right'(p.26). In strict context this realization springs from a longing for 'the sweet specificity of marriage, its firm ballast and sail'(p.26), but in the wider context of the novel as a whole it stands as Bascombe's clearest insight, and, again paradoxically, his clearest affirmation since what the novel explores above all is the impossibility of 'sweet specificity'; the tenuousness of any deceptively 'firm ballast and sail'.

Both of the two key events still to be analyzed in this reading of the novel are mentioned in this first chapter, are *anticipated*, and both presume relief from 'having to make everything up now'; thus "Make a contribution" will be my angle' Frank confidently tells us of his visit to Herb Wallagher, 'It is the kind of story I enjoy and find easy to write'(p.11). And he again depends on the given, on a presumption of 'firm ballast and sail' when anticipating taking Vicki to the

midwest: 'But I will soon show her the midwest, where old normalcy floats heavy on the humid air'(p.13). It is of course in the deconstruction of such presumptions and more importantly in the consequent struggles of Bascombe to 'find [his] way about' in the deconstructed world of his 'unravelling' texts, his lost securities of being, that the novel's adequate potential lies. The disrupting of a hoped-for aesthetic 'ballast and sail' for Bascombe's mourning/dissociation in this first chapter and the ambivalent release it offers is followed not by a leap to resolution, but a further disrupting of epistemic securities, namely sportswriting.

The complexities raised by Frank Bascombe's meeting with Herb are carefully prepared for by Ford. The narrative 'space' between Bascombe's first mention of it and the event is heavily punctuated with digressions on sportswriting and more importantly athletes. The most interesting of these digressions actually concerns itself with the very specific problem raised by Herb's 'post-athleticism' - his forced re-entry into 'the world' from football. In this passage in fact we find the outline of a speculative 'metaphysics' aimed at dealing with, at 'enclosing' Herb's condition:

At this moment it may be of interest to say a word about athletes, whom I have always admired without feeling the need to be one or to take them at all seriously, and yet who seem to me as literal and within themselves as the ancient Greeks (though with their enterprises always hopeful).

Athletes, by and large, are people who are happy to let their actions speak for them, happy to be what they do. As a result, when you talk to an athlete, as I do all the time...he's never likely to feel the least bit divided, or alienated, or one ounce of existential dread...you can bet he isn't worried one bit about you and what *you're* thinking. His is a rare selfishness that means he isn't looking around the sides of his emotions to wonder about alternatives for what he's saying or thinking about...

...Years of athletic training teach this; the necessity of relinquishing doubt and ambiguity and self-inquiry in favor of a pleasant, self-championing one-dimensionality which has instant rewards in sports. You can even ruin everything with athletes simply by speaking to them in your own everyday voice, a voice possibly full of contingency and speculation. It will scare them to death by demonstrating that the world - where they often don't do too well and sometimes fall into depressions and financial imbroglios and worse once their careers are over - is complexer than what their training has prepared them for.(pp.68-9)

This construction of Bascombe's is to some extent borne out by his meeting with Herb - certainly Herb has fallen into 'depressions...and worse', in fact a degree of madness, as a result of his career ending. However, this passage is, we find, far more revealing of Bascombe than Herb in the final analysis. Indeed, the interview with Herb in many ways *inverts* the 'metaphysics' of Bascombe's ontology of athletics, a 'metaphysics' and ontology which is his *own* haven from the dis-locatedness of his inner life. Not far from this passage is an earlier reflection on sportswriting which explicitly confirms this 'parasitical' security of being clung to by Bascombe:

I had no more interest in what I might write next - the next sentence, the next day - than I cared what a rock weighed on Mars. Nor did I think that writing a novel could make me interested again.

Though I minded like all get out the loss of anticipation. And the glossy sports magazine *promised me* that there would always be something to look forward to, every two weeks...*And it wouldn't be something too hard to handle in words...*I was as *comfortable as an old towel in a locker room*, had plenty of opinions and had always admired athletes anyway. The good-spirited, manly presence of naked whites and Negroes has always made me feel *well-located*, and I was never out of place asking a few easy-to-answer questions and being somewhat less imposing than everybody around.(p.49 Italics mine)

By the time the actual interview takes place then, we are prepared for the fact that what is ostensibly an occasion for *disclosure* (an interview) is in fact, if Frank gets his way, to be an occasion for *enclosure*. The 'relinquishing [of] doubt and ambiguity and self-inquiry' is, despite Frank's disclaimer with regard to this 'metaphysic' ('it may be of interest to say a word about athletes, who I have always admired without feeling the need to be one or to take them at all seriously') a better description of his own sportswriting, rather than of Herb's athletic, ethos. And again a suggestive linkage with the question of history is made here, shadowing the more obvious evasions and enclosures. The hint is clear - the ironic, often grotesquely comic distance Bascombe effects between himself and Herb is simply another rhetorical evasion/enclosure (Frank's "'I'm keeping my distance from him, Mrs Wallagher'"(p.160) is skilfully double-layered). The rhetoric of craziness and pessimism hardly begins to deal with the

disturbance and disruption wrought on the presumptions, the metaphysical containments that Frank has brought to the interview and by extension to his protective epistemic shelter from the grief, the loss, finally the *différance* that 'possesses' him, the shell of his sportswriting. Bascombe suggests walking to the lake to conduct the interview, since he used to visit it when he was in college. The first 'foreboding' regarding the interview is Herb's ignoring of this reminiscence:

He is not interested in my past, though that's no crime since I am not much interested myself...

The door opens behind the storm-glass and a slender, pretty black woman...steps half out onto the step. She gives me a watery half-smile...

...'I'm keeping my distance from him, Mrs Wallagher.' I give her a friendly smile to match the frail one she has given me...

...'Okay now, Frank, what's this bunch of lies supposed to be about,' Herb says gruffly as we whirl along...

...'I've got my mind on an update on Herb Wallagher, Herb. How he's doing, what're his plans, how life's treating him. Maybe a little inspirational business on the subject of character for people with their own worries. Maybe a touch of optimism in the soup...

...'I know readers would be interested in hearing about your job as spirit coach. Guys you played with taking their cue from you on going the extra half-mile. That kind of thing.'

'I'm not going to be doing that anymore, Frank,' Herb says grimly, pushing harder on his wheels. 'I'm planning to retire.'

'Why so, Herb?' (Not the best news for starters.)

'I just wasn't getting the job done down there, Frank. Too much bullshit involved.'

An uneasy silence descends as we cross the road to Walled Lake.(pp.160-1)

Already, then, at the beginning of the interview we find several indicators as to the underlying dynamic of the situation. The reference to history has already been noted, also, the reference to Frank's keeping his distance, but this second point is now further strengthened and tied far more directly to the rhetorical/epistemic concerns initially and perhaps seemingly tenuously attributed to it. Thus Frank refers to the interview as 'an update on Herb Wallagher, Herb,' immediately and strikingly splitting or dissociating, even alienating the physical presence of his subject, Herb, from the rhetorical construct he has in mind, Herb Wallagher, now referred to in the third person. The impression of an alienation of sorts from physical being is of course suggested by Herb's physical debilitation, but figural significance is layered on

figural significance, and we learn that Frank has in mind an article on Herb's work as 'influence', as 'spirit coach' in fact, and the sense of dissociation is complete - dissociation from Frank, who wants only a rhetorical construct to fit his own constructed securities, and of course from Herb's own self.

The 'uneasy silence' that descends as they reach the lake figures a dis-ease on a variety of levels, then, as indeed does the bizarre breaking of it:

'It's funny,' Herb says, where he can see the lake from an elevation. 'When I first saw you, you had a halo around your head. A big gold halo. Do you ever notice that, Frank?' Herb whips his big head around and grins at me, then looks back at the empty lake.

'I never have, Herb.' I take a seat on the pipe bannister that runs the length of the dock at the end of which two aluminium boats ride in the shallow water.

'No?' Herb says. 'Well.' He pauses a moment in reverie. 'I'm glad you came, Frank,' he says, but does not look at me.

'I'm glad to be here, Herb.'

'I get mad sometimes, Frank, you know? God *damn* it. I just get boiling.' Herb suddenly whacks both his big open hands on the black armrests, and shakes his head.(p.162)

This first real sign of Herb's 'craziness' takes us on to a richly figurative plane; the reference to the halo connects up to a whole figural sub-strata in the novel, namely Catholicism, the episodes in the novel taking place over an Easter weekend and one of the most enduring images in the book being the near life-size wooden Jesus outside the Arcenault home. Not that religion as such is a 'theme' of the novel, however; Catholicism figures far more as a type of the aesthetic/epistemic/ontological contradictions in constant conflict in the novel. "I think he's the tackiest thing in the entire world and *I'm* a Catholic" (p.250) comments Vicki on the wooden Jesus, and there is pointedly no resurrection for Frank at the close of the weekend, only Walter Lockett's death, a perhaps final alienation from his ex-wife and a less than exalted fling with a temporary young reporter at the office. Through the halo image the interview slips not into religious symbolism, then, but the more familiar tensions of semiological and epistemological imperatives. This becomes clear in the next exchange between the two men:

'Do you have any theories about art, Frank?' Herb says... 'I mean do you, uh, have any fully developed concepts of, say, how what the artist sees relates to what is finally put on the canvas?'

'I guess not,' I say. 'I like Winslow Homer a lot.'

'All right: He's a good one. He's plenty good,' Herb says, and smiles a helpless smile up at me...

...'How long did you play pro ball, Herb?'

'Eleven years,' Herb says moodily... 'You know I've been reading Ulysses Grant, Frank.' He nods profoundly. 'When Grant was dying, you know, he said, "I think I am a verb instead of a personal pronoun. A verb signifies to be; to do; to suffer. I signify all three"... what the hell do you think he meant by that? A verb?' Herb looks up at me with face full of worry. 'I've been worried about that for weeks.'

'I couldn't begin to say, Herb. Maybe he was taking stock. Sometimes we think things are more important than they are.'

'That doesn't sound good, though, does it?'

...'It's hard to say.'

'Your halo's gone now, Frank. You know it? You've become like the rest of the people.' (pp.162-3)

The halo disappears, it seems, as a result of Frank's evasiveness, his unwillingness to engage with Herb's craziness/dissociation. Of course the reason for this unwillingness is no mystery given Frank's by now familiar reluctance to do anything other than enclose such dislocations with his 'optimism'. Herb's dilemma is precisely Frank's - both men are living 'post-existences' (verbs follow pronouns). Frank more than Herb, in fact, could be characterized as a 'verb' rather than as a 'personal pronoun'. We see him after all as a succession of 'voices', a succession of 'evasive actions', a rhetorical dynamic (always subsuming the disruptive, the 'semiotic'<sup>20</sup> and re-presenting it as the 'moral', as *contained* significance) rather than an essence expressing a self *through* discourse. Thus Frank loses his status as a potential coherer of existence, as a potential conferer of identity - all he can in fact offer is further rhetorical dissociation, is enclosure, the constructing of a Herb Wallagher rather than the *disclosure* involved in actually connecting with the 'I', the 'pronoun' that is Herb. Consequently, Frank has recourse only to his mechanism of enclosure, his 'metaphysics' of sportswriting, a bland metaphysics which Ford significantly holds in tension with the grim *physics* of the situation - Herb's paralysis, the chill off the black water of the lake:

There is major silence now that Herb has told me what it's like not to have his legs to use. It is not an empty moment, not for me anyway, and I am not discouraged. I would still like to think

there's the possibility for a story here. Maybe by going off his medicine Herb will finally come back to his senses with some unexpected and interesting ideas to bring up and end up talking a blue streak. That happens every day.

'Do you ever miss playing football, Herb?' I say, and smile hopefully.

'What?' Herb is drawn back from a muse the glassy lake has momentarily fostered. He looks at me as though he had never seen me before...The wind has wandered back now and a chill picks up off the black water...

...Herb stares at me reproachfully. 'You're an asshole, Frank, you know that?'

'Why do you say that?'

'You don't know me.'(pp.164-5)

Herb's final rebuke here, 'you don't know me', is the essence of Frank's failure in this episode, since it cuts two ways: Frank could be rebuking himself with the same accusation. Instead, right up to the very end of the disastrous interview Frank's discourse still refuses to acknowledge the ontological implications of the evasion he has been caught in:

'We didn't talk much about football,' Herb says thoughtfully. He is now as sane and reflective as an old sextant.

'I guess it didn't seem it was much on your mind, Herb.'

'It really seems insignificant now, Frank. It's really a pretty crummy preparation for life, I've come to believe.'

'But I'd still think it had some lessons to teach to the people who played it. Perseverance. Team work. Comradeship. That kind of thing.'(p.167)

Inevitably then, the disruption which Herb unleashes is sublimated, still possessing, still inhabiting Frank, but merely emerging as a quaking diaphragm, and is finally evaded, tellingly, through an insistence on the *hierarchy*, or the *grammar*, of the occasion:

For some reason Herb seems to be having a hard time making his head be still. It's wandering all around. 'You couldn't really like sports, Frank,' he says. 'You don't look like a guy who likes sports.'

'I like some better than others.' It is not that uncommon a question, really.

'But wouldn't you rather talk about something else?' Herb shakes his big head, still wondrous. 'What about Winslow Homer?'

'I'd talk to you about him, Herb. Any time. Writing about something is a lot different from doing the thing itself. Does that clear anything up?' For some reason my diaphragm, or its vicinity, feels like it is quaking again.

'Pret-ty interesting, Frank.' Herb nods at me with genuine admiration. 'I'm not sure it explains a goddamn thing, but it's interesting. I'll give you that.'

'It's pretty hard to explain your own life, Herb.' I'm sure my quaking is visible, though maybe not to Herb, for whom the whole

world might quake all the time...I think I've said enough. I'm supposed to be asking you questions.'

'I'm a verb, Frank. Verbs don't answer questions.'

'Don't think that way, Herb.' My diaphragm is crackling.  
(pp.168-9)

Just as literature 'fails' in the first chapter then, sportswriting fails here. What is presented as *disclosure* is revealed as *enclosure*. Again we are back to: 'All we really want is to get to the point where the past can explain nothing about us and we can get on with life. Whose history can ever reveal very much?' We are back, that is, to the paradoxical evasion of disclosure in the name of disclosure, and this is where the dynamic of the third key disruption begins, that of his attempted relationship with Vicki, this third failure functioning as the apotheosis of the deconstructive collapses that have already undermined Frank's ontology, his 'rhetoric of life', over this weekend.

Again, it is prepared for carefully, and again we find the semiological (with X the question of 'voice' and poetry, with Herb sportswriting, aesthetics and Ulysses Grant's 'verbal being', now the memory of a relationship with a literary deconstructionist) inextricably bound up with the ostensibly psychological problematic in hand, shading the psychological once more into epistemological and ontological figural resonances:

Full disclosure never does anybody any favors, and in any event there are few enough people in the world who are sufficiently within themselves to make such disclosure pretty unreliable right from the start...

...I remember, in fact, the Lebanese woman I knew at Berkshire College saying to me, after I told her how much I loved her: 'I'll always tell you the truth, unless of course I'm lying to you.' Which at first I didn't think was a very good idea; though stewing over it after a while I realized that it was actually a piece of great luck. I was being promised truth *and* mystery - not an easy combination. There would be important things I would and wouldn't know...and all I had to do was agree, and be forever freed.

She was a literary deconstructionist and had a mind trained for that kind of distinction.(p.83)

At first this now physically as opposed to rhetorically relational impulse towards 'full disclosure' seems to be an impulse to release, to a 'stepping out' of the protective, metaphysical carapace of enclosure of Bascombe's 'verbal' 'post-existence'. As Frank says of the typical one-night affairs he found himself drawn to after Ralph's death:

All at once I was longing with all my worth to be part of that life, longing to enter completely into that little existence of hers as a full (if brief) participant...'I love you,' I've heard myself say more than once to a Becky, Sharon, Susie or Marge I hadn't known longer than *four hours and fifteen minutes!* And being absolutely certain I did; and, to prove it, loosing a barrage of prying, human-interest questions - demands, in other words, to know as many of the whys and whos and whats of her life as I could.(p.135)

In any of Ford's earlier novels and even stories this impulse to 'enter completely' another existence would signal a redemptive escape from the Ideal solipsism of his characters' typical ontological self-protectionism. Here however there is no redemption, only the ongoing struggle between enclosure and disclosure, in all its disguises. Bascombe goes on to explain:

All of it the better to get *into* her life, lose that terrible distance that separated us, for a few drifting hours close the door, simulate intimacy, interest, anticipation, then resolve them all in a night's squiggly romance and closure...

...This, of course, was the world's worst, most craven cynicism. Not the invigorating little roll in the hay part, which shouldn't bother anyone, but the demand for full-disclosure when I had nothing to disclose in return.(pp.135-6)

Of course it is not that Bascombe literally has nothing to disclose; far from it. It is simply that the relational impulse is driven not by an acceptance or openness to otherness, but an overwhelming impulse to an almost womb-like enclosure, the physical expression of his psychological dreaminess and his ontological escapism (the spectre of deconstruction is evoked in opposition to this again):

What I was doing, though I didn't figure it out until long after I'd spent three months at Berkshire College - living with Selma Jassim, who wasn't interested in disclosure - was trying to be within myself by being as nearly as possible within somebody else. It is not a new approach to romance. And it doesn't work. In fact, it leads to a terrible dreaminess and the worst kind of abstraction and unreachableness.(p.136)

When Bascombe attempts to say a 'goodbye to history' in the form of a new-found love for Vicki, then, the interrelations made between the alienations of the past and the 'otherness' or *différance* within instincts and emotions (within being itself) are fully consistent with the problematics already found to be implicit in the more obviously semiological domains of *written* textuality:

A lot happens to you in your life and comes to bear midway: your parents can die (mine, though, died years before), your marriage can change and even depart, a child can succumb, your profession can start to seem hollow. You can lose all hope...And

correspondingly it is hard to say what *causes* what, since in one important sense *everything* causes everything else.

So with all this true, how can I say I 'love' Vicki Arcenault? How can I trust my instincts all over again?...

...And the answer like most other reliable answers is in parts.

I have relinquished a great deal. I've stopped worrying about being completely *within* someone else since you can't be anyway...I've also become less...'writerly serious,' and worry less about the complexities of things, looking at life in more simple and literal ways. I have also stopped looking around what I feel to something else I might be feeling...

...When you are fully in your emotions, when they are simple and appealing enough to be in, and the distance is closed between what you feel and what you might *also* feel, then your instincts can be trusted.(p.138)

This tentative 'goodbye to history' is, however, simply the ironic introduction to the disintegration, or the deconstruction, of the relationship Frank sees as his chance to close 'the distance...between what you feel and what you might *also* feel', to abolish otherness and with it *différance*. He finds himself going through Vicki's purse despite himself, and ends up shamefaced in the bathroom, figurally confronting *différance*, his own otherness, in the bathroom mirror:

I resemble a wretched sex-offender - cigaret dangling in my fingers, blue-piped pajamas rumpled, my face gaunt from gasping, the stern light pinching my eyes narrow as Everett's. I am not a pretty sight, and I'm not a bit happy to see myself here...I have gone poking around after full disclosure before my disavowal of it is barely out of my mouth - a disappointing testimony to self-delusion, even more disappointing than finding dagger-head Everett's picture in Vicki's pocketbook where, after all, it had every right to be and I had none.(p.141)

Vicki's discovery of his prying is the first obvious nail in their relationship's coffin, though Ford makes it clear that the link between Frank's failure with X, with Herb and now with Vicki, is effectively seamless, not a matter of simple circumstance:

A big handsome tear leaves her eye, goes off her nose and vanishes into the pillow. I have managed to make two different people cry inside of two hours. I am doing something wrong. Though what?(p.178)

It perhaps goes without saying that if we extend the two hours to twenty-four it also includes X at the cemetery. And Bascombe's initial answer to his own question - 'Cynicism' - is less revealing than his proposed solution, again a premature, desperate 'goodbye to history':

My only hope now is to deny everything - friendship, disillusionment, embarrassment, the future, the past - and make my stand for the present. If I can hold her close in this cold-hot afternoon...maybe I will love her after all, and she me, and all this will just have been the result of too little sleep in a strange town, schnapps and Herb.(p.178)

In the end however, the only goodbye which lifts their spirits is the goodbye to their *present*; the day becomes a failure and they finally agree to return to New Jersey, and it is, ironically, only then that Frank feels 'the sky of this long day lighten about me now for the first time, and the clouds begin at last to ascend'(p.183).

Bascombe's Easter Sunday begins, significantly, with a 'historical' reference to dissociation, and in some ways a return to it, an ironic commentary perhaps on his thoughts of the night before outside Vicki's apartment after their return from Detroit, 'left alone in [his] Malibu, staring at the glossy moon as if it were all of mystery and anticipation, all the things we are happy to leave and happier yet to see come toward us new again'(p.185):

A gray, silvermane mist inhabits my room. I lie on the floor of the upstairs sleeping porch, fully clothed, my head cushioned by the boards, which are cold and morning-slicked by mist. In this posture I would often wake up in the months after X left...still dressed and stiff as a mummy, with no memory of moving. I do not yet know what to make of it. Back then it didn't necessarily seem a bad sign, and it doesn't now. And though a longing permeates the cool morning, it is familiar enough, and I'm happy to lie still and listen to my heart harmlessly thump. It is Easter.(p.209)

This passage is also of course an ironic commentary on another historical 'text', the resurrection account. Whilst Jesus ascends, leaving his grave-clothes behind as the sign of his ascension; Bascombe wakes 'still dressed and stiff as a mummy, with no memory of moving'. The ironic doubling is far from gratuitous - the resurrection motif recurs throughout Bascombe's account of his journey to and afternoon spent at the Arcenaults'. Each use of the motif has its own shades of significance, but it can be seen that whatever the 'shading', each reference brings us more or less obliquely back to the dynamics of enclosure/disclosure and being-in-time, of textuality and history.

Of course the dialectic of the resurrection motif is a problematic one in the context of this most resolutely a-transcendent of novels; irony is, as has already been indicated, a dominant factor, and its primary manifestation as regards this motif is as structural deferment - we find a recurring rhetoric of resurrection persistently undercut by a structural breakdown of its dialectic. As with the two previous key breakdowns or failures already examined, the terms of this deconstruction are ultimately, if elliptically, rooted in questions of textuality and history, in the semiology of (postmodern) being.

For instance, when Frank stops off on his journey for a drink in Sweet Lou's Sportsman's B'ar we find his sportswriting optimism all set to construct the sort of textual resurrection (Lou, he discovers, was a football star) he has so far been denied both at Ralph's grave and during his interview with Herb:

'Where's Lou today?' I ask after I've ordered a whiskey. I would, in fact, like to meet him, maybe set up a *Where Are They Now* feature: 'Former Giant lugnut Lou Calgagno once had a dream. Not to run a fumble in for a touchdown or to play in a league championship or to enter the Hall of Fame, but to own a little watering trough in his downstate Jersey home of Bamber, a quiet, traditional place where friends and fans could come and reminisce about the old glory days....'(p.246)

But again the attempted textualization proves inadequate:

'Lou who?' the woman says, lighting a cigarette and blowing smoke away from me out the corner of her mouth...

...'I used to be a big fan of his,' I say, though this isn't true. I'm not sure I ever heard of him. To be honest, I feel like an idiot.

'He's dead. He's *been* dead maybe, thirty years? That's approximately where he is.'

'I'm sorry to know that,' I say.

'Right. Lou was a real nunce,' the woman says, finishing wiping out the ashtray.

'And he was a big nunce. I was married to him.' She pours herself a cup of coffee and stares at me. 'I don't wanna ruin your dreams. But. You know?'(pp.246-7)

In fact Lou was gunned down by gangsters, denying Frank even a 'moral', if downbeat, closure - 'Not the way these things usually turn out and not exactly what you'd want to read about before dinner behind a chilled martini'(247). Even the semiological 'life' Lou still has, the pictures of him on the walls which first prompt Frank's interest in a textual 'resurrection', are finally desacralized, stripped of significance, 'emptied' by his widow's indifference, a further ironical

indictment of the sign as transcendent signifier, of the text as valorizing, 'resurrecting' transcendental form:

I cluck my tongue and look at Lou's widow. 'It's nice you keep the place this way.'

'He had it in his will that all these had to be left up, or I'd have changed it, what, a hundred years ago? It has to stay a B'ar, too, and buy from his distributorship. Otherwise I lose it to his guinea cousins in Teaneck. So I ignore him. I forget whose picture it is, really.(p.247)

Once at the Arcenault household the impulse to textualize becomes even more dominant - Bascombe now not simply textualizing the being of strangers, but himself through internalized role-playing:

I had sheltered hope that her dad and I could become bosom buddies even if Vicki and I didn't work things out. He and I could still be friends. If his tire went flat some rainy night in Haddam or Hightstown or anyplace within my area code, he could call me up. I'd drive out to get him, we'd have a drink while the tire was being fixed at Frenchy's and he would go off into the Jersey darkness certain he had a friend worthy of his trust and who looked down life's corridor more or less the way he did. Maybe we could take the brother fishing at Manasquan (no need to bring the women in on it). Vicki could be married to Sweet Lou Calcagno's stepson over in Bamber, have a wonderful life as a beer distributor's wife with all the hullygully of kids. And I could be the trusted family friend with a heart of gold. I'd renounce my failed suitor's glower for the demeanor of a wise old uncle. That would be enough for me, just the natural playing out of the pleasing present.(p.255)

Frank's hopes for such a new, 'enclosed' life are further boosted by Vicki's father, Wade, who is quick to link the idea of a paradise to that of enclosure:

'This is our little Garden of Eden down here, and we want to keep it so the outsiders don't ruin it for us, which is why I don't mind driving fifty miles to work. Though I guess I shouldn't be closing the drawbridge.' His clear eyes sparkle with admission. 'We're all from someplace else these days, Frank.'(p.268)

When Wade takes Frank down into the basement, into his 'devil's dungeon', then, this enclosure inevitably carries resonances of a pre-resurrection entombment, of a prelude to, we are led to suppose, Frank's new life and 'heart of gold'. Certainly Ford is quick to paint this episode in the cellar on an ironically cosmic, transcendent scale:

Wade is fiddling with metal objects, possibly the shade of a utility lamp, a fuse-box door, possibly a box of keys. 'Ahh, the Christ,' he mutters.

Suddenly a light flutters on, not a utility lamp but a shimmering white fluorescence in the raftered ceiling. What I see

first in the light is not, I think, what I'm supposed to see. I see a big picture of the world photographed from outer space, fastened to the cinderblock wall above Wade's workbench. In it, all of space is blue and empty, and North America clear as in a dream, from miles away, in perfect outline white against a dark surrounding sea.

'What d'you think, Frank?' Wade says with pride.

My eyes try to find him, but instead find, directly in front of me where I could touch it, a big black car - so close I can't make out what it is, though it certainly is a car, with plenty of chrome and a glassy black finish. CHRYSLER is lettered above big wide louvered grillwork.

'By God, Wade,' I say.(p.269)

The renovated black Chrysler becomes a touchstone, as it were, for a tentative communion between the two men. Its presence both dissociates and reflects Bascombe:

Wade and I are silent in the presence of his Chrysler and each other.

This situation could, of course, result in disaster, as many such situations do. A fear of what he may innocently ask me now, or a greater fear that I may have nothing special to say in answer and be left standing here as mute as a rocker panel - these make me wish I were back upstairs seeing the Knicks whip tar out of the Cavaliers, cheek-by-jowl with my old friend Cade. Sports is a first-rate safety valve when you and your whole value system are brought under friendly but unexpected scrutiny.

'Just what kind of fellow are you?' would be a perfectly natural curiosity. 'What are your intentions regarding my daughter?' ('I'm not at all sure' would not be much of an answer.) 'Who in the world do you think you are?' (I'd be stumped.) Suddenly I feel cold, though Wade doesn't seem to have any tricks up his sleeve. He is someone with codes I respect and that I would like to like me. All the best signs, in other words, are not so different from all the worst. Wade puts his fingertips to the porcelain-black fender and stares at them. I'm sure if I were closer every feature of me would be spelled out clear as a mirror.(p.271)

But the almost religious, even funereal solemnity its cold, black presence seems to demand also releases Frank (unwillingly) from his evasions, from his sports:

'Frank, where're your parents?' Wade looks gravely at me.

'They're both dead, Wade,' I say. 'A long time now.'

'Mine, too.' He nods. 'Both of 'em gone. We all come from nowhere in the end, right?'

'I guess I don't really mind that part,' I say.(p.272)

Finally Frank is even dispossessed of his ultimate instrument of dissemblance (and hence self-dissociation), his voice: 'By being direct and unambiguous and nothing like what I expected, he has left me nothing to say'(p.273). When he does finally speak we find him for the first time in the novel acknowledging historicity and locatedness: "'Wade, what part of Texas did

you grow up in?" I say, and grin hopefully'(p.274). Finally, tying all these glimmerings of an 'awakening' firmly together into an explicitly 'resurrective' dynamic, we are given Wade's parable-like story of a man's faked death and subsequent release into a new life. It is significant that when Wade asks Frank midway through the story to guess what the man chose to do seeing that he had been 'signally' though not physically annihilated Frank responds: "I've got a pretty good idea." (Who in a modern world wouldn't?)(p.276).

This story however is very much an *axis* for the use of the resurrection motif - on the one hand it is an explicit valorization of circumstance (Wade goes on to identify the same process in his own, far more mundanely 'transformed' life: "We both just had new lives served to us, and a conviction to do something with them"(p.276)). On the other hand it marks the beginning of a progressive desacralizing of the motif, an ironic undercutting of its promise (the transformative possibility of chance) on its own terms, deconstructing not the experience as such, but the 'resurrective' valorization of it; Wade's 'resurrected' friend works in his 'new life' on the Turnpike with Wade:

[Wade] wants me to know that he's discovered something important late in life, something worth knowing when very few people ever discover anything by just living. He'd like to pass some wisdom along from the for-what-it's-worth department, though I can't help wondering what his friend's wife would think if she ever came through Exit 9 at just the right moment. It could happen.(pp.276-7)

Wade's disclosures initially seem to offer the chance of a 'resurrective', reciprocal communion, but again we find dissociation not in the problematics of an 'external' relationship, but in the deeper dislocations of self; Frank is drawn to the 'damn good ordinary life' he now associates with Wade and the possibility that he might 'Forge a commitment in Sherri-Lyn Woods'(p.278), but:

For some reason I am nervous and embarrassed. My hands are still cold and stiff, and I stuff them inside my pants pockets and stare at Wade blank as a tomb door. That I withhold at just this moment is a major failing in my character.(p.279)

The reference to 'a tomb door' is of course significant. Frank's attempted 'resurrection' is paralyzed not because he has no point of contact with Wade, not

because the 'tomb door' stands between them, but because it stands *within* him, it is an inner, even ontological 'death' that makes his hands 'cold and stiff', his 'soul' helpless behind the 'tomb' of his face, his identity.

When they leave the basement and sit to table, Frank finds himself struggling to articulate through another sports 'metaphor' just this helplessness, a helplessness not understood by Wade or any of the self-possessed Arcenaults. Frank begins by evoking a political question from Wade (interestingly recalling again the historical/anticipation dialectical present of Frank's 'verbal', always kinetic, slippery present of being) through a familiar resort to sportswriting rhetoric. Wade asks for Frank's opinion on the political state of the nation, and is answered with:

'I haven't paid much attention to politics the last few years, to tell the truth...

...I write sports, Wade. If I can write a piece for the magazine on, say, what's happening to the team concept here in America, and do a good job there, I feel pretty good about things. Pretty patriotic, like I'm not isolating myself'.(pp.284-5)

He then goes on to explain his theory of 'team concept', and central to it is a pervasive sense of dis-location from identity (team membership), a dissociation of duty and motive, immersion (enclosure) and alienation, role ("The way these guys use team concept is too much like a machine to me, Wade...It's just the nineteenth century idea - dynamos and all that baloney") and self ("to play or not to play; to play well or not so well. To give his all...What if I just don't want to win that bad, or can't"(p.286)), which is at bottom for Frank the very type of his ontological dis-ease.

Indeed, Bascombe goes on to use terms which directly recall Herb's verb/pronoun distinction - "It's an event, not a thing. It's time but not a watch. You can't reduce it to mechanics and roles"(p.287). And while such a rhetoric looks back to the disruptions of the interview with Herb, they also point, in the use of the term 'roles', to Frank's definitive disruption-to-come with Vicki. His long explanations, his last attempt to construct a role for himself in the 'team' of the Arcenault family (the 'uncle' with the 'heart of gold' now becomes a 'drunk

old uncle' speaking 'in a voice she's never heard') are what finally alienate him irrevocably from Vicki:

Vicki is staring down at her full plate, but glances up once out the tops of her eyes and gives me a disheartened sour-mouth of disgust. There is trouble, as I've suspected, on the horizon. I have talked too much to suit her and, worse, said the wrong things. And worse yet, jabbered on like a drunk old uncle in a voice she's never heard, a secular Norman Vincent Pealeish tone I use for the speaker's bureau and that even makes *me* squeamish sometimes when I hear it on tape. This may have amounted to a betrayal, a devalued intimacy, an illusion torn, causing doubt to bloom into dislike. Our own talk is always of the jokey-quippy-irony style and lets us leap happily over 'certain things' to other 'certain things' - cozy intimacy, sex and rapture, ours in a heartbeat. But now I may have stepped out of what she thinks she knows and feels safe about...There is no betrayal like voice betrayal, I can tell you that.(p.288-9)

The final deconstruction of Frank's hoped-for resurrection soon follows. X phones with the news that Walter Lockett, Frank's one male friend in the novel (another alienated, dissociated self seeking resurrection, a 'goodbye to history') has committed suicide. Suddenly the resurrection motif is completely overturned - the 'goodbye to history' is not identifiable with resurrection, however ironic, nor with anything transcendent, figuratively or literally. As Frank reflects, staring at the sky- and heaven-suggesting pale blue ceiling of the bedroom he is taking X's phone call in: 'In the pale blue ceiling I wish I could see something I recognized. Almost anything would do...Though of course there is nothing to see above me'(p.295). His Easter Sunday, fulfilling the ominous beginning of it, closes not with resurrection, but 'Preemptive, ill-meant death...Its gluey odors are spread over me. I can smell them myself'(p.297). And as if to put the final seal on this inversion, this disruption, we find Frank's repudiation of Christ's resurrection mirroring the complete failure of his desacralized own. Frank's prediction as to a 'modern' Christ's fate:

I cast a wintry eye at Lynette's spurious beige Jesus nailed to the siding. He makes life a perfect misery for as many as he can, then never takes the heat. He should try resurrection in today's complex world. He'd fall right off His cross on His ass. He couldn't sell newspapers.(p.300)

parallels his own humiliation as he's knocked to the ground by Vicki in response to his final attempt to 'enclose' both her and by extension himself in 'love':

'You just think you want some little life like Lynette's to complain about, but I'm going to give you the best of all worlds. You don't know how happy you're going to be.' I give her a big signpost grin and step forward to put my arms around her, but she busts me full in the mouth with a mean little itchy fist that catches me midstride and sends me to the turf.(p.301)

As in the bedroom he is left staring upwards, now 'on his ass' like his predicted Christ, under 'rending clouds'. Far from beginning again, life, at the very close of this Easter Sunday chapter seems to have ruinously passed him by:

And for a time then I sit where I've fallen beside my car and stare up at the rending clouds, trying to make the world around me stop its terrifying spin. Everything has seemed beckoning and ahead, though I am unsure now if life has not suddenly passed me like a big rumbling semi and left me flattened here by the road.(p.303)

The paradoxical 'release' which inhabited the failure opening the novel has already been noted, but not the release claimed to inhabit the typologically identical failures of Herb's interview and Vicki's rejection. It is certainly present however, though not fully realized until Bascombe himself has had time to accept them. Even before Frank leaves the Arcenault's a tension arises in the language of his recollection which makes the previously straightforward identification of new life with Vicki/the Arcenault family much more tenuous:

I get onto my knees...where she sits, thighs crossed regally and entombed in taught panty hose. 'A man's on his knees to plead and beg with you to marry him...How can you say no?'

'It ain't gon be hard,' she says giggling, embarrassed at me for yet another reason.

'Frank?'

My name. Unexpected. Called from somewhere in the unexplored cave of the house.(p.292)

Here, just before Frank hears the news about Walter Lockett, we find the recurring figure of entombment identified with images previously redolent of life and acceptance. The implication is, of course, that Frank's losing of both Vicki and her family is as close to resurrection, to escape from entombment (enclosure again) as he is ever likely to get. But in the end even the most flexible use of the resurrection motif is inadequate to describe the 'stepping out' which such failure is 'possessed' by. In a passage which through its rhetoric of invisibility and its rhetoric of reincarnation recalls and transfigures both Herb's 'verbal being' and the struggle towards a finally unattainable resurrection we find Bascombe for the

first time acknowledging a 'setting free...sole and sovereign, without props', without the need to enclose, without the need for sportswriting/'history':

Where, in fact, do you go if you're me?

Where do sportswriters go when the day is, in every way, done, and the possibilities so limited that neither good nor bad seems a threat?...For the moment, I'm beyond all hopes, much as I was on the night X burned her hope chest while I watched the stars.

Walter would say that I have become neither the seer nor the thing seen...Invisibility, in truth, is not so bad. We should all try to know it better, use it to our advantage...since at one time or other - like it or not - we all become invisible, loosed from body and duty, left to drift on the night breeze, to do as we will, to cast about for what we would like to be when we next occur. That, let me promise you, is not an empty moment. And further yet from real regret...Just to slide away like a whisper down the wind is no small freedom, and if we're lucky enough to win such a setting-free, even if it's bad events that cause it, we should use it, for it is the only naturally occurring consolation that comes to us, sole and sovereign, without props or the forbearance of others - among whom I mean to include God himself, who does not let us stay invisible long, since that is a state he reserves for himself.

God does not help those who are invisible too.(p.345)

### 3

In closing his narrative in the past tense Bascombe does more than achieve a switch in perspective; he achieves, paradoxically, a 'goodbye' to the history that the present tense was always struggling to contain. By the close of the novel defeat is no longer to be enclosed by its (present) tense, but accepted as something beyond enclosure, as being 'outside history...like horses and fog', like the white moon of 'Intimacy':

I never properly wrote about Herb Wallagher and had to accept defeat there. Some life is only life, and unconjugatable, just as to some questions there are no answers. Just nothing to say...

...Things occur to me differently now, just as they might to a character at the end of a good short story.(p.375)

Release from history-as-enclosure is, paradoxically then, found in an acceptance as opposed to a rhetorical denial of being as *past* as well as present and the anticipated future. An embracing of 'the "reference" within the Now to a past Now'. As Bascombe says of the fact that he has discovered 'honest-to-goodness relatives'(p.376) in Florida: 'And truthfully, when I drive back up Highway 24...I am usually (if only momentarily) glad to have a past, even an

imputed and remote one...It is not a burden, though I've always thought of it as one'(p.377). In other words, 'possession' by historical otherness, though a 'potentially catastrophic' curse of being-in-time is also, when accepted, its mystery and doorway out of the self-protecting, so often wounded and alienated 'Ts' 'metaphysical enclosures': 'the thing we say we'll never do is the very thing, after all, we want to do most'(p.378) Frank concludes, and 'The only truth that can never be a lie, let me tell you, is life itself - the thing that happens'(p.380).

The self can be released from the 'residue or skin' of the knowable, hence enclosed and enclosing, past only *because* the self has, or is inhabited by, a past 'outside history', outside because though past it is, finally, unknowable, perhaps beyond even memory; is the irreducible, primal otherness or *différance* possessing and releasing being-in-time. As if consciously echoing Peter Currie's 'step outside the metaphysical enclosure', Ford is careful to have Bascombe end the novel walking out, stepping, again paradoxically, both into and out of history, and through this contradiction, this paradox, out of the Ideal containments of metaphysics into the otherness of 'negation', into 'transitive essence' and 'accidental being', into freedom:

I walked out of the condos onto the flat lithesome beach this morning, and took a walk in my swimming trunks and no shirt on. And I thought that one natural effect of life is to cover you in a thin layer of...what? A film? A residue or skin of all the things you've done and been and said and erred at? I'm not sure. But you *are* under it, and for a long time, and only rarely do you know it, except that for some unexpected reason or opportunity you come out - for an hour or even a moment - and you suddenly feel pretty good. And in that magical instant you realize how long it's been since you felt just that way. Have you been ill, you ask. Is life itself an illness or a syndrome? Who knows? We've all felt that way, I'm confident, since there's no way that I could feel what hundreds of millions of other citizens haven't.

Only suddenly, then, you are out of it - that film, that skin of life - as when you were a kid. And you think: this must've been the way it was *once in my life*, though you didn't know it then, and don't really even remember it - a feeling of wind on your cheeks and your arms, of being released, let loose, of being the light-floater. And since that is not how it has been for a long time, you want, this time, to make it last, this glistening one moment, this cool air, this new living, so that you can preserve a feeling of it, inasmuch as when it comes again it may be just too late. You may just be too old. And in truth, of course, this may be the last time that you will ever feel this way again.(pp.380-1)

Carver both opens and closes *Elephant* with figures of just such a paradoxical release. In 'Boxes' we find containment (the boxes that hold the narrator's mother's possessions as she restlessly moves from home to home across the country) and release (that restlessness, that constant journey into possibility) both figured in the same image, just as for the narrator the otherness of womanhood comes to represent both the containment of the womb (of history) and the centrifugal pull outwards now not into dissociation and ennui but the 'other side' of that negation which is potentiality.<sup>21</sup>

In 'Errand' we find these dynamics shifted away from the 'physical' figures of birth and parenthood and into the more explicitly historical figures of biography. The present tense of 'Boxes' gives way to the past tense, as it does in *The Sportswriter*, and again we find the 'goodbye to history' made possible in the postmodern realist text by its embrace and acceptance, an acceptance mirroring the aesthetic embracing of Chekhov in the story. Not that this final adequate movement is identifiable with biography (enclosure) as such; rather it escapes both enclosure and dissociation through 'stepping outside', through 'closing its hand' not on illusory essences but on that which is 'outside history', tellable only as irreducible *story*, a movement that is a mirror itself to the rhetorical dynamic from enclosure to the refusal to 'give up the attempt to find one's way about' of postmodern *life*. It is this paradoxically adequate refusal to 'leave the room as it is', this refusal to 'silence' that which signifies 'in excess' of 'meaning', and a correlative determination to take the deconstructive, the contingent, ultimately the inexplicable to oneself that lies behind the final, 'ex-centric' gesture of acceptance figured here at the very close of this last collection:

Do you understand what I'm saying, Olga said to the young man. Leave the glasses. Don't worry about them...Leave the room as it is. Everything is ready now. We're ready. Will you go?

But at that moment the young man was thinking of the cork still resting near the toe of his shoe. To retrieve it he would have to bend over, still gripping the vase. He would do this. He leaned over. Without looking down, he reached out and closed it into his hand.(p.124)

## Notes to Chapter Four

- 1 Raymond Carver, 'Blackbird Pie', *Elephant and Other Stories* (London, 1988), p.109.
- 2 Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter* (London, 1986), p.380.
- 3 Bobbie Ann Mason, *In Country* (London, 1986), pp.244-5.
- 4 Jayne Anne Phillips, *Machine Dreams* (London, 1984), p.331. For a fuller discussion of the question of history in this novel see also Phyllis Lassner, 'Women's Narrative and the Recreation of History', in *American Women Writing Fiction: Memory, Identity, Family, Space*, edited by Mickey Pearlman (Kentucky, 1989), pp.193-207.
- 5 Bobbie Ann Mason, 'Shiloh', *Shiloh and Other Stories* (London, 1983).
- 6 Jayne Anne Phillips, 'Rayme, A Memoir of the Seventies', in *Granta* 8 (1983), pp.35-42.
- 7 Richard Ford, *The Ultimate Good Luck* (London, 1989), p.94.
- 8 Richard Ford, 'Empire', *Rock Springs* (London, 1988), p.158.
- 9 Raymond Carver, 'Tell The Women We're Going', *The Stories of Raymond Carver* (London, 1985), p.221.
- 10 'Tell The Women We're Going', p.226.
- 11 Raymond Carver, 'Will You Please Be Quiet, Please', *The Stories of Raymond Carver*, p.178. Further references in brackets after quotation.
- 12 Raymond Carver, 'Cathedral', *The Stories of Raymond Carver*, p.447.
- 13 Peter Currie, 'The Eccentric Self: Anti-Characterization and the Problem of the Self in American Postmodernist Fiction', in *Contemporary American Fiction*, edited by Malcom Bradbury and Sigmund Ro (London, 1987), pp.53-69 (p.69).
- 14 'Blackbird Pie', p.91. Further references in brackets after quotation.
- 15 Jacques Lacan, 'The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious', *Ecrits: A Selection* (London, 1977), p.174. See Chapter Three, footnote no.17.
- 16 See my earlier reading of Scotty's coma in Carver's 'A Small, Good Thing', Chapter Two.
- 17 Henry Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (Oxford, 1985), p.20.
- 18 Compare this history/ontology linkage with Bobbie Ann Mason's 'Shiloh' where again Civil War/marriage/dissociation of self become a complex figural matrix.
- 19 See 'The Eccentric Self', the 'rhetorical' self as 'Not the synthesis of the constitutive subject...but the dispersion of subjectivity, of a 'fundamental' self, among the endless oppositions, the relations-without-terms of language'(p.64).
- 20 Kristeva's 'semiotic' is here used rather loosely in the sense of 'sub'-linguistic rather than strictly pre-linguistic.

- 21 The women in question are the narrator's mother and lover respectively. See 'Boxes', *Elephant and Other Stories*, pp.22-3. See also the release into acceptance/potentiality at the close of 'Elephant' - again the figure of containment (the loaning of money) becomes the 'vehicle' also of release. The narrator speeds away with George in 'his big unpaid-for car', *Elephant and Other Stories*, p.90.

## CONCLUSION

Of course Carver exploits the freedom, the release he has won in *Elephant* further with *A New Path to the Waterfall*, a text which significantly structures poetry and prose, Chekhov and Carver into an aesthetic matrix which is itself a liberation and not merely a figuring of it, which is an uncompromising, even joyful embrace of otherness, a freeing not just of Currie's 'sovereign subject-character' through the exploding of the history/being/text matrix, but the sovereign author too, Carver's own paradoxical embrace and 'goodbye to history'. And Ford also, with *Wildlife*, seems to exploit, less radically but still positively, the release from the ironic typologies which contained his fiction previous to *The Sportswriter*. More importantly as regards the perspective of this study as a whole, it can be seen that the 'achieved' liberations of these later texts are primary examples of a distinctive, already hugely influential and perhaps even transformative aesthetic re-orientation in contemporary American fiction.

This thesis began with an analysis of the death of realism, or rather an analysis of its obituaries. But what the 'new realist' fictions of the writers discussed in this study have made imperative is not just defiance in the face of this dismissal, far less a reactionary rejection of the postmodern, rather a fundamental re-casting of the binary, 'ultimist' terms of its attempted dispatchment. For Carver and Ford, as for Abish, Handke, Mason and Frederick Barthelme, there can no longer be any inviolate boundary line between the discourses and the phenomenal conditions of life. The fictional worlds of all these writers are haunted, terrorized and illuminated by their plethora of *signs*, their always disposable, ubiquitous and yet tenuous cultural shards of meaningfulness, identity and security. The physical and emotional menace that is their other hallmark cannot be finally unravelled from the 'new German', 'new

Kentucky' and anonymous mid-West landscapes of those worlds. Reflexivity is not an alternative to the depiction of the mundane 'real' for these writers, it is in fact the one common imperative in their realism, their mimesis.

Furthermore, though a similar imperative can be traced all the way back to the Gothic and Romance discourses of Poe, Hawthorne and Melville, and pre-eminently through the American Modernism of Anderson, Stein and Hemingway, the new realism even at its most significantly indebted is a *re-discovery* and not a *re-assertion*, an aesthetic and epistemic process, not a principle. Carver and Ford, more than any other American writers, have exploratively pushed the distinctive radicalism of Hemingway's vernacular realism far beyond its stoic and mythopoeic Ideal containments. Even in the context of the bleakest of Carver's early stories, or the harshest of Ford's first novels there are only the ironic, postmodern shadows of the more static posturings which mar so many of Hemingway's Modernist 'performances'. There is in fact always to be found in their darkest ironies, subversions and dislocations a *structural* unease with *any* stasis, whether the Modernistic stasis of mythopoeic valorization, or the postmodern paralysis of stark reflexive ultimacy.

In the end it is just this unease, this kinetic restlessness that must be seen as the mimetic and adequate ground of both Ford's and Carver's realism. It is the reflexive imperative as fully assimilated into contemporary fiction as it is into contemporary existence - Butor's 'fundamental narrative'. The fictional worlds of Carver and Ford are, like the worlds of Abish, Handke and Mason, places 'defined by Wittgenstein, Chomsky and other theorists of language and reality'<sup>1</sup> simply because the empirical world of late capitalist Western culture itself is, if not defined by such theorists, then surely only properly *definable* in all its reflexive, parodic, suggestive multivalence according to such distinctions as they draw, dangers they reveal, lacunae they acknowledge and paradoxical liberations they welcome.

Finally, then, it can be argued that the new realism as a whole, and Carver and Ford in particular, have transformed an exhausted realism's containments

into a vital, exploratory mode, forging in the face of a corrosive ultimacy both an adequate epistemology of textual telling and liberating ontology of textual being. To close ironically, since the concluding words are those of the arch-prophet of realism's doom, their authentic and powerful postmodern narratives are nothing if not consummate examples of a mode of fiction 'not only passionately formal...but passionately about things in life as well'.<sup>2</sup>

## Notes to Conclusion

- 1 Jerome Klinkowitz, 'Aspects of Handke: The Fiction', *Partisan Review*, 45 (1978), pp.416-25 (p.416).
- 2 John Barth, 'A Dialogue: John Barth and John Hawkes', in *Anything Can Happen*, edited by Tom LeClair and Larry McCaffery (Urbana, 1983), pp.9-19 (p.18).

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