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## THE LITERARY BIAS: NARRATIVE AND THE SELF

**Abstract.** Narratives are an interface that evolution has instilled in our brains for their most optimal interaction with reality. Without them we would not be who we are: creatures that narrativize their experiences, integrate them into their autobiographical self, and imagine the future of this self. But narratives also distort reality by endowing it with meaning, purpose, and causality even in cases when there are none. Literary stories with weak narrativity, such as those by Raymond Carver, remind us of another modality of the human mind and selfhood available to us, one which registers the world without subjecting it to narrative selection and chronological ordering.

Evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould wonders why nearly every story we tell is false in the same way, “a less interesting reality converted to a simple story with a message.”<sup>1</sup> “Do we need these stories so badly because life isn’t heroic or thrilling most of the time?” he asks, suggesting that since almost all our experiences are uneventful activities like breathing, eating, walking, and sleeping, our stories are “*unlike* life” (251). This includes stories told by science. For example, the account of human evolution as uninterrupted progress misinterprets facts because most of the time “nothing happens” (252). The problem with this account is the same as with virtually any other story: it picks out rare moments of activity and strings them together into a vibrant tale of exciting events. According to Gould, this “legendmaking” (251) derives as much from bones and artifacts

as from the norms of literature, for “stories only go in certain ways—and these paths do not conform to patterns of actual life” (251). Although Gould is primarily interested in how our literary bias derails scientific objectivity, his argument is applicable beyond science, as his frequent switching between scientific knowledge and life in general attests to. His main argument is that storytelling distorts reality. But if numerous experts, as we will see, ranging from anthropologists, through psychologists, to linguists, insist that singling out exemplary experiences and arranging them into a coherent narrative is ubiquitous across human cultures and beneficial to our phylogenesis, implying that it is irrelevant whether a practice that facilitates survival falsifies reality or not, how, then, can we justify, outside the realm of scientific discourse, a call for stories that conform to patterns of actual life? What is the use of storytelling that goes against what evolution has taught us to expect from stories? Why would anyone be interested in narratives that defy the norms of literature and are constructed *like* life?

### **What is There to Tell?**

Raymond Carver’s collection of short stories *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* is a good case in point of the kind of storytelling that challenges our expectations from literary narratives. Often dealing with the ebb and flow of relationships over time, typically of working-class people in small towns and dysfunctional families plagued with alcoholism, unemployment, and infidelity, these stories are narrated in a laconic style of external description, choppy dialogues, and abrupt narrative shifts. Bolstered by paratactic sentences and clumsy repetitions, this style gives the impression that nothing worth mentioning happens in these stories and that narrators themselves are not too keen to tell us about it. Moreover, the extreme shortness of these texts, severely restricted temporal horizon in which action takes place, lack of resolutions, and absence

of introspection and character psychology add to the overall effect of incompleteness and indeterminacy. What we get are slivers of reality without an overreaching frame of reference that would render them meaningful.

“I Could See the Smallest Things” will serve as an example. A first-person narrative of less than four pages, it tells a story of Nancy’s nocturnal encounter with her neighbor Sam: Lying in bed alongside her sleeping husband, Nancy hears that the yard gate is open. She gets up, looks at the gate through the window, returns to bed, but unable to sleep on account of her husband’s loud breathing, goes to the kitchen, makes tea, and smokes a cigarette. She decides to shut the gate and goes outside, where she finds Sam killing slugs in an adjacent plot. They talk about the slugs, Sam’s family, and Nancy’s husband Cliff, whereupon she returns home and goes to bed. She suddenly realizes that she forgot to close the gate, looks at her husband, and tries to fall asleep. The mood of this slow-paced, pared down narrative is objective. As the opening section demonstrates, we cannot separate between external events and Nancy’s inner response to them: “I was in bed when I heard the gate. I listened carefully. I didn’t hear anything else. But I heard that. I tried to wake Cliff. He was passed out. So I got up and went to the window.”<sup>2</sup> Nancy’s mode of narration is segmented. She dispenses with transitions between sentences, and when she employs them, she opts for lackluster conjunctions like “so” that cannot adequately express motivation. This segmented mode of storytelling continues as Nancy sits in the kitchen: “After a while I decided I’d go out and fasten up the gate. So I got my robe” (*CS*, p. 240). Her subsequent portrayal of running into Sam is similarly disjointed. She asks him if he heard anything coming from her gate: “He said, ‘I didn’t hear anything. Haven’t seen anything, either. It might have been the wind’. He was chewing something. He looked at the open gate and shrugged” (241).

The narrative maintains this aloof style that strikes as bereft of intention. After Sam's report of no suspicious activity around Nancy's gate, he invites her over to his lot to show her something. At this point Nancy digresses from recounting what happened that night to tell us more about Sam: "Sam and Cliff used to be friends. Then one night they got to drinking. They had words. The next thing, Sam had built a fence and then Cliff built one too. That was after Sam had lost Millie, gotten married again, and become a father again all in the space of no time at all. Millie had been a good friend to me up until she died. She was only forty-five when she did it. Heart failure. It hit her just as she was coming into their drive. The car kept going and went on through the back of the carport" (241). This excursus, however brief, is significant in that it does more than just provide background information on Sam. Though narrated in the same detached and factual fashion that does not delve into Nancy's thoughts and feelings, it is a testimony to how shaken she was by Millie's death, and arguably still is considering the odd phrase "she did it" to refer to Millie's heart failure. This digression is as much about Sam as it is about Nancy. It hints, in a faint and oblique manner characteristic of Carver's stories, at what Millie's death meant to Nancy: loss of a friend and possibly also realization of her own finitude, given the details of how Millie died and how young she was.

After this digression, Nancy returns to the events of that night. What Sam wants to show her is how he kills the slugs that have infested his rosebushes. Nancy looks at the slugs, for an instant gets distracted by the sound of an airplane overhead, and then turns her attention to Sam:

'Sam', I said, 'how's everybody?'

'They're fine', he said, and shrugged.

He chewed on whatever it was he was chewing. 'How's Clifford?' he said.

I said, 'Same as ever'.

Sam said, 'Sometimes when I'm out here after the slugs, I'll look over in your direction'. He said, 'I wish me and Cliff was friends again. Look there now', he said, and drew a sharp breath. 'There's one there. See him? Right there where my light is'. He had the beam directed onto the dirt under the rosebush. (242)

Nancy is clearly more interested in Sam and his family than the slugs, and even though Sam proceeds to showcase his pesticide method, he is not opposed to discussing personal lives. Despite the terseness of these exchanges and their unrefined format of the I said-he said for which Carver has been mocked, it is obvious that Sam misses Cliff. If Nancy lost a friend in Millie, so did Sam in Cliff. After a quick display of his extermination protocol, Sam returns to personal issues: "'I quit, you know', Sam said. 'Had to. For a while it was getting so I didn't know up from down. We still keep it around the house, but I don't have much to do with it anymore'. I nodded. He looked at me and he kept looking. 'I'd better get back', I said" (242). As she takes her leave, Sam asks her to tell Cliff he says hello. Like at the beginning when Nancy described the sleeping Cliff as passed out, Sam's confession is an innuendo about Cliff's drinking problem. Sam wants Cliff back, not only for himself as a friend but also for Nancy as a husband, assuring her that Cliff, too, can get sober.

The final section of the story depicts a scene with Nancy back in the house getting ready for bed:

In the bedroom, I took off the robe, folded it, put it within reach. Without looking at the time, I checked to make sure the stem was out on the clock. Then I got into the bed, pulled the covers up, and closed my eyes.

It was then that I remembered I'd forgotten to latch the gate.

I opened my eyes and lay there. I gave Cliff a little shake. He cleared his throat. He swallowed. Something caught and dribbled in his chest.

I don't know. It made me think of those things that Sam Lawton was dumping powder on.

I thought for a minute of the world outside my house, and then I didn't have any more thoughts except the thought that I had to hurry up and sleep. (243)

It is endings like this that have exasperated critics. Nothing is brought to closure here. This ending neither gathers together the various strands of the plot nor does it elucidate the story's pivotal themes. All we get is Nancy's inventory of what she did upon her arrival home. In spite of interjecting a passing thought that associates the saliva caught in Cliff's chest with the slugs, this association, aptly introduced with the phrase "I don't know," is too tentative to become the awaited climax of the story. Even though we know more about what happened that night as we reach the end of Nancy's narrative, we are at a loss as to why she is telling us about it. Something is wrong in her life, yet exactly what is not sufficiently spelled out. We get hints that it has to do with Cliff's drinking problem, but we cannot be sure how much it actually matters to Nancy and if it is, in fact, the reason for her story. Her narrative is too thin and jagged, with too few inner thoughts and explanations, to convey a clear message. There is no gradual building of tensions toward a denouement that resolves them. With no major peaks and revelations, the story falls flat.

## **A Search for Meaning**

Nancy Easterlin, an advocate of evolutionary approaches to literature, chose Carver's "I Could See the Smallest Things" to illustrate how literary studies can profit from these approaches. Curiously, however, instead of explaining how evolutionary science can help us understand this story's radical descriptiveness, dramatic monotony, segmented narration, and lack of resolutions, that is, its subversion of the literary bias decried by Gould, Easterlin does the opposite. She reads it metaphorically in order to rectify its non-compliance with the norms of literature. A closer look at her reading is instructive in showing how our preconceptions about what constitutes our humanity affect our expectations from literary narratives.

Easterlin's chief thesis is that this story is a "drama of consciousness," a parable about the epistemic process whereby a developing consciousness or awareness emerges into its higher form by moving toward something to be known.<sup>3</sup> She argues that Nancy's narrative mimics the movement of the mind toward knowledge, which coheres with her epistemic journey through a geographical territory. Both Nancy and the reader are enticed by "the feeling of 'something to be known'," something that is outside, in Nancy's backyard but also figuratively outside what she knows, presumably about herself, and as a result they embark on "the act of constructing meaning" (Easterlin, p. 194). This thesis relies heavily on Easterlin confusing motifs in this story with symbols and metaphors. For instance, she interprets the bright moon and the open gate as symbols for something "illuminating and opening out onto a terrain of knowledge that stands in contrast to Nancy's circumscribed domain" (211). The trouble with this interpretation is that the text does not justify it. Nancy is simply surprised how bright it is outside. The same goes for the open gate. She is concerned that it is an invitation for nefarious deeds. Easterlin reads into Nancy's associations

as well. She claims that Nancy's description of Sam—"His hair was silvery in the moonlight and stood up on his head. I could see his long nose, the lines in his big sad face" (*CS*, p. 241)—invokes "potentially illuminating knowledge" (Easterlin, p. 212) only to quickly annul it: "Sam, with his sad moon face, becomes inextricably linked to ugliness" (213). These are unfounded claims. The text does not say or even imply that Sam's face is moon-like, not to mention ugly. It states that it is big and sad. Nancy does not describe reality in symbolic binaries, such as dark and light, obfuscating and illuminating, ugly and pretty. Her account is markedly plain, and when she does resort to comparisons and associations, they are based on spontaneous resemblances rather than expressive images grounded in a stable allegorical framework.

Easterling applies this symbolic interpretation to the rest of the story. She proposes that Nancy's walk in the garden—"It felt funny walking around outside in my nightgown and my robe. I thought to myself that I should try to remember this, walking around outside like this" (*CS*, p. 241)—"suggests to the reader that in some sense Nancy has never been outside" (Easterlin, p. 212). Again, there is no suggestion to this effect in the text. Nancy emphasizes the strange feeling of walking outside at night in a nightgown because it is unusual and she wants to remember it. The same pertains to the ending of the story. According to Easterlin, Nancy's "overt connection between her husband and the slugs" (214) fails to become a "conscious revelation" (214) because Nancy hastens to sleep, which is evidence of her "urgent need to shut down thinking, willing unconsciousness as a means to suppress permanently the ugliness that has been revealed to her" (215). Once more, the text resists this symbolic interpretation. The connection between Cliff and the slugs is not overt. First, it is a connection between the slugs and the sound of the dribble in Cliff's chest, not Cliff himself. Second, it is impromptu, introduced with the phrase "I don't know." And third, this phrase is followed by a passive construction that stresses the speculative nature of



the link: “I don’t know. It made me think of those things that Sam Lawton was dumping powder on.” The last line of the story, “I thought for a minute of the world outside my house, and then I didn’t have any more thoughts except the thought that I had to hurry up and sleep,” is not Nancy’s anxious attempt to permanently suppress her nascent revelation. She just needs to sleep. We do not know why, but her fastidious inspection of the stem of the alarm clock without looking at the time gives us a clue. She has to get up early, very likely for work. The beginning of the narrative corroborates this prosaic reason for her determination to sleep. When drinking tea in the kitchen, she remarks: “It was late. I didn’t want to look at the time” (240).

Easterlin reads “I Could See the Smallest Things” as a tale of a consciousness that ascends to a higher stage of awareness by enlarging its knowledge, but ultimately recoils from taking the last step and stops short of bringing this knowledge to conscious revelation. She denounces this sudden stop as negation of something deeply human, “a universal (and definingly human) proclivity toward sense-making” (211). Carver’s fictive environments, she concludes, “deny characters their functional humanity” (215), their “fully human matrices of experience” (209). Easterlin expects perceptions to add up to conscious revelations because evolution has granted us this ability. But what would such a revelation be in Nancy’s case? That her husband’s drinking habit is repulsive, like the slugs? That is hardly a revelation to her. According to Easterlin, Nancy must seek knowledge, which will enable her to improve her life. However, the text does not intimate that Nancy is suppressing anything, certainly not permanently and with the ambition to erase all its traces. In the same way as there is a reason for her trying to fall asleep, there might be a reason for her not dwelling on certain things, like her association of her husband with the slugs. She is well aware that Cliff is a drunk. Sleeping is not a symbol of shutting down knowledge. It is a necessity dictated by the specific moment in which Nancy finds herself. The open gate is not a

symbol, either. It is a fact. Since the gate is ajar and she awake, why not close it. The story's undercurrent that alcohol damages relationships is fairly straightforward. While understated, it is not concealed behind veiled metaphors that beg to be decoded so that we can arrive at the meaning of this story.

### **The Rhetoric of Humanism**

Easterlin's reading of "I Could See the Smallest Things" is emblematic of the pervasive inclination among Carver's critics to search for and recreate what they deem is missing—a deeper, clearer, and more empowering meaning. Easterlin expects Nancy to diagnose the dreadful state of her marriage, properly verbalize it, and act on it. Arthur Salzman takes the same issue with the unnamed female protagonist-narrator in the early story "Fat," who like Nancy also hints at her marital discontent but remains equally passive, concluding her narrative, "It is August. My life is going to change. I feel it" (*CS*, p. 7), which for Salzman is a sign of mental torpor because she does not say that she will actively change her life and acknowledge why.<sup>4</sup> Although Carver's characters are often on the brink of gaining some important insight, they suppress it or do not know what to do with it. Critics' verdicts on stories that are available in different versions amplify the rationale behind their reproaches. They celebrate longer versions for their more vivid descriptions, wider perspective, ample characterization, elements of humor and irony, and more compelling endings that resemble classic epiphanies. Christopher Benfey hails their "wisdom, the epic side of truth."<sup>5</sup>

"A Small, Good Thing" and "The Bath" are a good example. The story is the same: as husband and wife take turns at the hospital by the bedside of their injured son while the other goes home to take a bath and change, anonymous phone calls, which turn out to be from the baker who wants to let them know that their son's birthday cake is ready, deprive them of this cleansing rest.

Critics applaud the former, longer version for its details, which create a “more humane backdrop” and penetrate “more deeply into a human situation,” and for its expressiveness and subjective nature, which they regard as “humanist” because it makes us feel the presence of the artist who “illuminates every particle of the world and charges it with meaning.”<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the truncated “The Bath” drains the “sense of humanity.”<sup>7</sup> It is a “fragmentary tale” permeated with “defective ambiguity” that leaves the reader no choice but to “work against a narrator’s tendency to sound cretinous.”<sup>8</sup> Other twin stories have elicited this rhetoric of humanism as well. “Where Is Everyone?” and its shorter version “Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit” have been described, the latter as the “barest skeleton” that puzzles the reader and the former as a touching tale in which the narrator has “colored in the story for us.”<sup>9</sup>

Even critics who urge us to read a given story vis-à-vis other stories, not by comparing its different versions but by placing it within the collection in which it appears, succumb to this rhetoric of humanism. Arguing that stories in every collection are interconnected, these critics conceive the task of reading as filling in what is missing in each story by bringing to play other stories in the collection in a bid to reconstruct their meaning. We are asked to scrutinize the “interstices between the stories” and consult “metastories in which the stories themselves, together with their constituent motifs, images, and turns of phrase, are part of the plot.”<sup>10</sup> Irrespective of whether critics classify Carver’s collections as short story sequences, which bind individual stories so tightly together that each story can be appreciated only if read along with other stories, or whether they categorize them as short story composites, which are looser units than sequences but still form a palpable whole by capitalizing on links as well as gaps between individual stories, for these critics the job of reading is to search through webs of references from one story to another

with the objective of mending their meaning.<sup>11</sup> Reading is an intellectual exercise of collecting information, tracing hints and clues, and extracting the message of the text.

Carver's critics expect to be rewarded with something concrete for their effort of reading. To this end they interpret words as symbols and motifs as metaphors in their pursuit of additional layers of the text that would alleviate its disturbing poverty. They extol fuller descriptions and more involved narration in the longer versions of the same stories, ignoring Carver's warning that stories like "A Small, Good Thing" and "The Bath" are "two entirely different stories, not just different versions of the same story."<sup>12</sup> And they trace recurring theme patterns and bits of information dispersed across stories within the same collection—all with the goal of reinstating what is absent. Once restored, a truly human world unfurls, imbued with meaning and consequently inspiring our active participation in it and control over our fate. These expectations, the rhetoric of humanism that validates them, and the recommended tactics for rescuing Carver's austere minimalism, pedestrian themes, and torpid characters are manifestations of a deep-seated discomfort among Carver's critics with what they hold as partial, vague, and incomplete. Carver's stories ought to edify us with wisdom or at least something enriching, lest they be inhuman.

### **Narrative and the Autobiographical Self**

Scientists in a broad range of disciplines confirm the legitimacy of Carver's critics' expectations. To expect a literary story to be complete, meaningful, and instructive is more than a culturally conditioned belief—it is an outcome of psychological and evolutionary mechanisms that have shaped us as human beings for tens of thousands of years and that have become an intrinsic part of our biological setup. Psychologists and cognitive scientists argue that without the causality-based and meaning-driven stories we would not be who we are. "*Stories teach us how to be human*"

because they simulate social experience and engage us, viscerally by activating our emotions, in the fundamental social dynamics of human life.<sup>13</sup> Insofar as stories ground themselves in basic human emotions and elemental motives, they also provide a sense of order, for as they filter out the trivial and tangential aspects of our experience, they propel us to recognize the fundamental structures of human concerns and to situate ourselves more consciously within our environment.<sup>14</sup> In the absence of a story our cognitive capacity diminishes, even shuts down according to some, because our mind has become accustomed to perceiving actions holistically as part of an unfolding story rather than as disconnected responses to the immediate circumstance or products of the current mental state of their agents.<sup>15</sup> This holistic perception as a model for making sense of our experiences is activated very early in childhood, and it progressively strengthens and expedites the advent of our autobiographical self. We harness narrativity systematically around the age of 8 for the purpose of constructing autobiographical memory, with our emotions, desires, and beliefs becoming part of this narrative construction of the self during mid-adolescence and achieving its full scale of operation around mid-twenties when frontal cortex, the part of the brain that regulates social interaction and long-term planning, is finally up and running.<sup>16</sup> Telling and listening to stories is an important catalyst in this process of acquiring the sense of a separate, continuous, autobiographical self because these activities solidify our memories and prompt our projections to the future. When we tell about our experience to someone else, the procedure of formulating it as a story creates a memory that preserves the gist of the story for much longer.<sup>17</sup> The same applies to hearing and reading stories. We are more likely to retain information when we receive it as a story.<sup>18</sup> As to our projections, we predict, plan, and prepare for the future by narratively imagining where the present state of things is heading.<sup>19</sup>

According to psychologists and cognitive scientists, we become who we are, that is, an autobiographical self with a strong sense of unity and identity over time, slowly and gradually. Evolutionary scientists give this ontogenesis of the autobiographical self a sturdy evolutionary underpinning by asserting that narrative emerged in the evolution of our brain as a principal matrix of organizing our experiences even more slowly and gradually. One of the decisive moments in this emergence was the relocation of our distant ancestors from the thick foliage of trees to the savannah. Consumption of more nutrient-dense foods led to the increase in brain size, owing both to better nutrition and the fact that by being freed from spending most of the day consuming low-calorie leaves our ancestors could use their time—and brain—more effectively by projecting their needs beyond the immediate moment and devising more elaborate ways of fulfilling them.<sup>20</sup> But the reverse applies as well. Bigger brain hinges on more and better food, which necessitates more cooperation to get it, which leads to bigger and more socially interlaced groups, which intensifies the need to service the social sphere (through grooming, for example), which entails more time away from foraging, which is feasible only if food is more plentiful and nutritious.<sup>21</sup> Bigger brains changed how we imagined and planned. Unlike our earlier human predecessors, who used a more primitive imagination in the form of planning their action in the moment by retrieving past experiences, about half a million years ago homo sapiens developed a new type of imagination that was activated not on the spot, but independently of real-time experience, a genuinely imagined situation on the basis of creatively assembling pieces of experiential memory.<sup>22</sup> Living in bigger groups posed hurdles as well, but these only accelerated brain development. Individuals needed to enhance their ability to interpret behavior of their group members, for example anticipate whether they are about to attack, share food, or initiate mating.<sup>23</sup> This constant pressure to interpret and anticipate meant that natural selection favored individuals with better cognitive skills of

metarepresentation, particularly the ability to abstract patterns, move mentally in time by recalling similar experiences, applying them in the present, and using them to predict the future. To be successful one had to be capable of conducting a complex mental picture of reality that includes oneself and others, who are now credited with minds of their own, with their own sets of metarepresentations.

Language is an important later addition to this uniquely human model of reality based on metarepresentation and to our growing proficiency in seeing things in patterns, including imagined patterns, rather than as discrete elements. Language gives our metarepresentations a more cogent structure by implementing more methodically the laws of space, time, and causality that are essential to our manipulation of the physical and social surroundings.<sup>24</sup> As we became more adept at denoting things explicitly via words, we started shaping our gestalt perceptions and imaginations into primitive stories about what happened, why, and with what ramifications. Other factors, such as the use of fire that extended daytime into the night and set more time aside for leisurely conversation which daily duties did not permit, triggered more elaborate stories.<sup>25</sup> This, in turn, gave rise to a supplementary function of storytelling as recording, storing, and transmitting important information. The human mind became a narrative machine that spins scenarios and lays down options.<sup>26</sup> At this point our ancestors not only perceived reality through narrative structures, they also listened to stories told by others in preparation for real-life situations. Stories became a repository of information and guidelines for how to act in specific circumstances. They were our ancestors' chess playbooks, since life, like chess, is combinatorial and at any moment there are too many possible moves to consider.<sup>27</sup>

This early human storytelling laid the foundation for full-fledged literary narratives. Although some scholars contend that all arts are an epiphenomenon—Gould sees them as a

byproduct of the evolutionary increase in brain size, a secondary effect of adaptation with no adaptive utility of its own—others argue that literary storytelling differs from other arts like music and painting by virtue of impacting our evolution directly. According to Steven Pinker, literary storytelling is not just a technology for pressing our pleasure buttons, a useless technology from evolutionary perspective because it hijacks response systems that have evolved for other adaptive purposes, but that it is a product of cognitive adaptations ensuing from mental experiments with hypothetical situations and extrapolation of their repercussions.<sup>28</sup> Denis Dutton takes it a step further, postulating that all arts emerged as tools of adaptation.<sup>29</sup> Regardless of who is right, literary storytelling became a staple of human cultures. What is more, it continued to expand. Individuals who were able to better tell and process stories enjoyed a reproductive advantage that could be passed to subsequent generations, primarily because entertaining storytellers were popular among their peers and secondarily because they managed to manipulate others' representations of their environment to their advantage.<sup>30</sup>

### **Literary Stories and Narrativity**

Scientists are adamant that narratives are instrumental to who we are. For them, human mind is a narrative mind because its fundamental schemes of pattern-cognition, chronology, causality, and teleology have proven advantageous for our survival. Moreover, they have contributed to the formation of the autobiographical self that other hominids do not possess, as other species of great apes show little concern for self-continuity and consistency across time.<sup>31</sup> Literary critics like Nancy Easterlin appeal to these scientific truths to condemn authors like Carver for distorting them. Carver's stories do not conform to our evolutionarily primed expectations from storytelling and from what constitutes proper human cogitation and behavior. These expectations and the



mental schemes that underlie them are not arbitrary. Even though they arose to assist adaptation to an environment that is different from the one that we now inhabit, Easterlin points out that for them to be drastically altered they would have to be functionally otiose for tens of thousands of years (Easterlin, p. 46).

Despite the irrefutable benefits of narrative forms in our dealings with the world, ourselves, and each other, literary stories cannot be judged solely by how accurately they enact scientific truths. Literary storytelling has shown a supreme gift for disrupting established practices and ways of thinking and opening new avenues for how we relate to the world. Carver's minimalism draws on this disruptive and innovative potential of literary narratives. It belongs to the long line of literary experiments with antinarrative elements and weak narrativity.<sup>32</sup> These experiments unsettle our evolutionarily acquired expectations from storytelling by decelerating the narrative forward movement, hindering the construction of a diegesis, and capturing the fact cited by Gould that in real life most of the time nothing momentous happens. Examples are abound, especially from Modernism onward: Gertrude Stein's use of repetition and syntactic dislocation in *Melantha*, the interwoven soliloquies in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, the episodic nature of the plot and the associative rather than logical connections between events in André Breton's *Nadja*, the narrative discontinuities and withheld resolutions in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, the question-answer style in the Ithaca chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and the multilayered language of puns and allusions in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Late modernists continue with these antinarrative experiments, most notably Samuel Beckett in the plotlessness of the sprawling monologue in *The Unnamable* and Alain Robbe-Grillet in the geometrically meticulous descriptions in *Jealousy*. Postmodern storytellers, such as John Barth in *Lost in the Funhouse* and Italo Calvino in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, recalibrate these experiments by accentuating

intertextuality, metafictional elements, and multidirectional textual movement. Some instances of antinarrative elements and weak narrativity, albeit more akin to retardation, can be detected before the modernist turn to language. In his novel *Realidad* the realist writer Benito Pérez Galdós decelerates action by placing dialogue to the forefront. Gustave Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* features long descriptive passages with verbs in the imperfect tense that temporarily freeze the narrative. And Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* hampers the central storyline of its protagonist's adventures by countless diversions, additions, and explanations.

Literary storytelling involves a mix of narrative and antinarrative elements, a fusion between the format of progressive development toward a climactic end and antinarrative suspension of this development. In literature, narrativity and antinarrativity are not two mutually exclusive principles, but a spectrum: "Some objects are narratives; some are quasi-narratives; and some are not narratives. Some narratives are more narrative than others; some non-narratives are more narrative than others; and some are even more narrative than narratives."<sup>33</sup> Carver's short stories are a special case of this blending of narrative and antinarrative elements. On the one hand, they do not advance smoothly toward a conclusive end. They are exceedingly descriptive, stylistically spasmodic, and with no clear endings that give the narrated events a sense of orientation and the story an unambiguous meaning. On the other hand, however, they do not offer much for interpretation, such as symbols, metaphors, understated emotions, hidden motivations, and intertextual references, or even too many opportunities for aesthetic delight in the form of sophisticated techniques of writing and other spectacles of technical bravura. They invite narrative reading only to thwart it without redirecting our attention to the literariness of the text. These stories are straightforward enough not to require special literary skills and a lot of interpretive effort, which distinguishes them from modernist and postmodernist narratives. At the same time,

this straightforwardness does not bring them any closer to conventional realism. The brevity of these stories, their hyperfocus on detail, and lack of persuasive narrative progression separates them both from the tradition of realism and its epistemological confidence that keen observation and exhaustive description are key to our knowledge of the world and the mind, and also from the tradition of modernism and postmodernism that foregrounds the medium and underscores limitations of what can be known through observation and description.

Carver's minimalist short stories like "I Could See the Smallest Things" are narratives of the middle. Their restrained temporal horizon, demotion of psychology, and focus on what is immediately given have a detemporalizing effect. By depriving time of its quality of flowing seamlessly from the past into the future, they erode the narrative forward movement and the sense of an ending. According to Frank Kermode, endings are inherent to our relationship with literary narratives. We read in anticipation of an end which retrospectively reconfigures everything that has been said by giving it a seal of completion: "We project ourselves past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle."<sup>34</sup> Since in our daily life we are always in the middle and never at the end, we cherish literary narratives for their faculty of relaxing the constraints of our finitude and enabling us to experience the end. Peter Brooks argues that reading literary narratives is inexorably "desire *for* the end."<sup>35</sup> Carver's stories frustrate this anticipation of the end and desire for it. Their commitment to a narrow window of time with little progression of the plot and conspicuously dull endings that do not have the power to convincingly conclude the narrative fail to gratify our craving to transcend our spot in time. Their paratactic sentences firmly plant us at this spot by eschewing subordination, which for most critics is an indefensible offense. For them, Carver's refusal to subordinate is proof of his "inability to conceptualize and articulate," which is a symptom of "fear of narration," if not "fear of life."<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, narration is to some degree inseparable from subordination. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit have argued that in the most general sense we have narration whenever something is placed in front of another thing which it partially blocks.<sup>37</sup> Narration engenders hierarchical orders of recognition, because for a story to move ahead a principal drama needs to emerge and work toward a climax against a background of secondary events. Carver's minimalist stories do not adhere to hierarchical orders. While unmistakably literary, they contain no more than the most basic hierarchies of characters and events, and thus a significantly inhibited movement ahead.

### **Narrative and the Impersonal Self**

We have been telling stories to each other and to ourselves in our minds for millennia. We have learnt to relate to our experiences by narrativizing them, so much so that Elinor Ochs asks us to imagine a world without narrative: "Imagine not even composing interior narratives, to and for yourself. No. Such a universe is unimaginable, for it would mean a world without history, myths or drama; and lives without reminiscence, revelation, and interpretive revision."<sup>38</sup> According to David Herman and Robert Scholes, narrative structuration is such a vital device for organizing our experiences, so deeply rooted in our physical and mental processes, that without it we would be incapable of making sense of the world and finding our way in it.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, this structuration is crucial for our psychological welfare. Narratives allow us to live a "unitary life," as Alasdair MacIntyre puts it, by enabling the autobiographical self to attain a sense of well-integrated existence, with clearly marked beginnings and ends of its various stages of evolution, as Paul Ricouer adds.<sup>40</sup> "We want our lives to have meaning, or weight, or substance, or to grow towards some fulness," Charles Taylor argues, "we want the future to 'redeem' the past, to make it part of a life story which has sense or purpose, to take it up in a meaningful unity."<sup>41</sup> The problem with

Carver's stories is that they do not properly engage our ingrained mental processes and as a result clash with our fondness for coherence, meaning, and unity. Their descriptiveness, stalled action, and absence of resolutions border on inhuman. And so do his characters. Stripped of the most rudimentary active attitude to themselves and the world that we ascribe to human beings, Carver's characters are anomalies, which the author does not try to mitigate by providing some enriching narrative framing or enlightening commentary that would guide our reading and clarify for us that these people are failures. Alan Wilde calls Carver's characters "catatonic," engulfed by a "terrible blankness that suspends the activities of the self."<sup>42</sup> Since these characters are only "passively reacting to circumstances whose provenance or true relation to themselves they are unable to discern, let alone attempt to address," Gareth Cornwell remarks, they lack "the authority to be themselves" and consequently are resigned to "go anywhere, do anything, have anything, be anyone."<sup>43</sup>

This might be just the right description of Carver's characters, their ability to go anywhere, do anything, have anything, and be anyone, minus the pejorative overtones. The ability to do anything and be anyone in Carver's stories is not a flaw but a specific way of relating to oneself and the world. Carver's characters think and act without fervor and determination, not because they are too simple-minded to grasp what has befallen them, but because they are more accepting of things as they are, no matter how lamentable. They do not lack feeling, yet rather than expressing it, brooding over it, and pondering how to ameliorate it, they just have it. They experience it and stay with it for as long as it lasts. When a new feeling arises, they do the same. Carver applies this formula to his narrators and their narratives as well. The uneventfulness of his stories, their lethargic pace, flat endings, and descriptive and segmented style of delivery are a foil to how the

characters in these stories relate to the world—moment by moment without an eye on the whole that unifies them.

While the human mind may be irreversibly a narrative mind given that narratives are indispensable to who we are as humans, the passivity of Carver's characters and the uneventfulness of his stories are not tokens of inhumanity. They showcase another function of the human mind and another notion of the self and its interaction with the world. This mind registers the world with little intervention and filtering of experiences through concepts and definitions of thought. The way Carver's characters relate to the world and his narrators tell their stories implies a self that is closer to core consciousness, to borrow Antonio Damasio's term, than to a full-blown autobiographical self.<sup>44</sup> Carver's characters and narrators have a tenuous sense of the self in the here and now, not a robust autobiographical self that constantly draws a temporal model of itself as a progression of a self-identical ego in time. Despite the fact that a character like Nancy in "I Could See the Smallest Things" perceives the world inevitably, like all of us, from the first person point of view as if from the inside, from the egocentric perspective that situates things for us and operationalizes them—Thomas Metzinger dubs this perspective the "ego tunnel" and Daniel Dennett the pull of "Cartesian gravity," likening it to a spotlight that allows us to focus on something by excluding other things—her mind is nonetheless surprisingly non-interventionist.<sup>45</sup> As a character, she is conscious of each moment without subjecting it to verbal and conceptual thinking that would make her the focal point of this moment and in so doing endow it with meaning and purpose. In other words, she does not narrativize her experiences in her mind with herself as their protagonist. As a narrator she is more open to articulating her experiences and arranging them narratively for the sake of her audience, but only to a limited extent and with considerable antinarrative impediments, as we saw.

Carver creates a literary representation of the self that is aware of the world and moves along with it as it changes without the need to dissect it, evaluate it, envisage other options, and guess the future. This non-interfering attention to the process of the world produces a flow of self-contained moments that are meaningless and aimless, not in the sense of hollow and superfluous, as Carver's critics have argued, but free of meaning and purpose. The self that does not interfere with its sensations, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and does not aspire to exert authority over itself is not ipso facto obtuse or dejected. Though passive and impersonal, it can be very receptive, even alert and sensitive, but without the voluntarist calculation and self-involvement of the interventionist mind of the autobiographical self. Unlike the latter, the registering self does not generate the impression of a separate agent that stands apart from the brain-body nexus which structures our experiences. The registering self is coextensive with what it perceives and experiences at each moment. These experiences are neither good nor bad. For them to be good or bad they would have to be assessed by some underlying experiencer. If one merely registers what is—the bedroom with the snoring husband, the tea and cigarette in the kitchen at night, the walk in the moon-illuminated backyard, etc.—everything is of equal value. One becomes indifferent, not in terms of being vacuous and apathetic, but not discriminating, differentiating, or even preferring. Everything is what it is, and the mind coincides with these moments, one after another.

This state of mind is profoundly unstable and susceptible to interruptions. It is not too long before thoughts, judgments, memories, and projections begin to crop up and dilute the concreteness of what is immediately at hand. Barring serious brain injuries and mental disorders, our default mind is the narrative mind and default self the autobiographical self, which brings us back to the above-discussed encephalic attributes of our brains that we have accumulated over the course of our evolution. Nevertheless, while not discounting our biological predispositions, the

passive, impersonal, and indifferent self is not an aberration, much less a symptom of the fear of life. It is not a corollary to atavistic regression to an earlier stage in our evolution when we were equipped with a more primitive consciousness that was not as self-reflexive and capable of self-projection beyond the immediate circumstance as the autobiographical self. The passive, impersonal, and indifferent self coexists with the autobiographical self. It is another modality of selfhood available to us. This modality does not force us to relinquish other modalities that make our lives easier or even conceivable, like the autobiographical self. We can still reason, question, appraise, recall, plan, and maintain self-continuity and self-consistency. These pragmatic strategies ensure our social and professional success. But we can also practice, whether occasionally or regularly, the other modality of selfhood that allows us to relate to ourselves and the world differently from the narrative mechanisms of the autobiographical self.

### **Varieties of Experience**

As evident in the negative comments of Carver's critics, our predilection for narrative structures and the autobiographical self goes hand in hand with a yearning for meaning and hope for something better. Experiments in psychology and neurosurgery confirm that human mind is addicted to meaning and allergic to uncertainty, randomness, and fortuity, and that if it does not find meaningful structures in the world, it will impose them.<sup>46</sup> Meaningful structures make us feel more secure. They also encourage our active engagement with the world and deliberate shaping of the future to extend our security beyond the current moment. Adam Phillips muses upon what is left once our hope for the future is taken out of the picture: "What are we doing once we are no longer waiting for something better, for the next best thing; no longer waiting for our supposed perfectibility, for the life to come?"<sup>47</sup> Though rhetorical, this question highlights our tendency to



persistently narrativize our experiences, integrate them into our autobiographical self, and imagine the future of this self.

Carver's minimalist short stories refuse to indulge our addiction to meaning and hope for something better. They contain little hope as a positive value, which is not the same as promoting hopelessness and desperation, as critics have suggested. If there is no future for Carver's characters, it is less because they are too slow-witted, indolent, and dispirited to improve their situation than because future for them is a too distant prospect. They take things moment by moment, witnessing what is, staying with it, and "enduring" it. When asked in an interview whether human endurance is his most salient subject, Carver agrees: "Most things that we care for pass away or pass by in such a rush that we can scarcely get a fix on them. So it's really a question of enduring and abiding."<sup>48</sup> But the interviewer misunderstands. He notes that in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* endurance is "the most one could hope for" whereas in the later collection, *Cathedral*, characters "prosper in spirit," thereby making it seem as though endurance were mere survival.<sup>49</sup> Notwithstanding that Carver tactfully skirts around this misunderstanding—he replies that he does not use the same characters in the same circumstances from one book to another—endurance in his stories is not inferior to the prosperity of spirit. It is not a failed or deficient existence, but a mode of existence in its own right. The passive, impersonal, and indifferent self exists by submitting to, keeping to, and enduring each moment.

Gould complains that our stories are unlike life because our literary bias transforms the neutrality, ordinariness, and repetitiveness of everyday reality into excessively happening tales that overstate causality and impart messages and lessons. Carver's minimalist short stories curtail this bias. Admittedly still narratives, and hence not entirely immune to our habit of structuring events by way of selection and chronological ordering, they are closer to what Gould posits as

patterns of actual life. Even if we are more cautious and speak of a certain version of life rather than life as such, these stories are unusual in how far they go in the opposite direction from the literary bias and the legendmaking propensities that evolution has programmed into our brains. However, this does not mean, as Nancy Easterlin claims, that Carver denies us our humanity. His literary representation of the passive, impersonal, indifferent, and enduring self is another, no less human form of experience. This experience is not as dependent on narrativity, search for meaning, projection toward the future, and hope for something better as the experience of the autobiographical self that painstakingly links a myriad of disparate events to itself and chains them together into a story with itself in the lead role. Inasmuch as the autobiographical self over-narrativizes its encounters in this fashion, it elevates each occurrence into an inherent and consequential component in the meaningful whole it imagines it is living. This mythologization of life and reality saturates everything with value and purpose. The autobiographical self is a source of narrative imagination designed to make us feel at ease in the world that rarely corresponds to our desires and seldom complies with the neat story structure of a well-ordered plot punctuated by clear beginnings and ends. If narrative is an interface that evolution has instilled in our brains for their most optimal interaction with reality, a screen that sifts through our experiences and choreographs them to help us achieve our objectives and therefore safeguard the continuation of our species, it is by definition an anthropomorphic distortion of reality. Even though our mind automatically looks for causal connections among the bits and pieces of information it receives and constructs a plausible story out of them, our causal intuitions, as numerous experiments have shown, are deeply flawed, and as a result we tend to exaggerate the consistency and coherence of what we see.<sup>50</sup> While we do not need to envision a world without narrative, our psycho-social dependency on narrativity is detrimental to other cognitive, affective, and existential modes of

experience that we have at our disposal. Carver's stories offer a literary representation of one such mode. They present a type of experience that concentrates on single moments as distinct yet fleeting configurations of things and events.

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## Notes

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<sup>5</sup> Christopher Benfey, "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit," Review of Raymond Carver: *Collected Stories* By Raymond Carver and *Raymond Carver: A Writer's Life* By Carol Sklenicka, *The New Republic*, 13 March 2010, p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> Irving Howe, "Stories of Our Loneliness," *The New York Times Book Review*, 11 September 1983, p. 43; Arthur Bethea, *Technique and Sensibility in the Fiction and Poetry of Raymond Carver* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 157; William L. Stull, "Beyond Hopelessville: Another Side of Raymond Carver," *Philological Quarterly* 64.1 (1985): 7–8.

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<sup>8</sup> William L. Stull, "Beyond Hopelessville," p. 10; Jack Bedell and Norman German, "Echoes of Slammed Doors: Resonant Closure in Raymond Carver's Minimalist Short Story," *Short Story* 8.2 (2000): 91; Mark Facknitz, "'The Calm,' 'A Small, Good Thing,' and 'Cathedral': Raymond Carver and the Rediscovery of Human Worth," *Studies in Short Fiction* 23.3 (1986): 292

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph Carroll, *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 115.

<sup>15</sup> Robyn Dawes, “A Message from Psychologists to Economists: Mere Predictability Doesn’t Matter Like It Should (Without a Good Story Appended to It),” *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 39.1 (1999): 29; Michael Carrithers, “Narrativity: Mindreading and Making Societies,” in *Natural Theories of Mind: Evolution, Development, and Simulation of Everyday Mindreading*, ed. Andrew Whiten (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 310.

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<sup>24</sup> Steven Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature* (New York: Viking, 2007), pp. vii–viii, 228.

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<sup>28</sup> Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, p. 543.

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<sup>47</sup> Adam Phillips, *Unforbidden Pleasures* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), p. 193.

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