

uity to Pádraic Fiacce's brutal realism. Turning to younger contemporaries, including Derek Mahon, Paula Meehan, Ciaran Carson, and John Banville, he finds in Sebastian Barry's plays an illustration of how "speech on the stage can intervene directly in how history has been written." In Paul Muldoon's poems he sees acts of "reconfiguring or bringing into active alignment the past and present." And in John McGahern's fiction he discovers both a "recuperative vision" and evidence that "culture, through such writing, is capable of renewing itself from within."

Those are inspiring words, and on the whole Pierce makes a persuasive argument, however narrow its frame of reference. His book unfortunately is marred by numerous errors, typographical and factual, as when he allows "lays bear" to slip his grasp, or speaks of the "Cork realist Joseph [read Frank] O'Connor," or informs the reader that John Connolly was executed in the "ironically named Mountjoy Jail." He was in fact executed at Kilmainhain Gaol. And though Pierce's narrative style is lucid for the most part, the reader must sometimes endure the jargon of theory ("valorising," "performative utterance") and the opacity of academic prose.

Whether the reader will judge the reward worth the effort will depend, I suspect, on whether he or she accepts the postcolonial model as applicable to Ireland. Richard Tillinghast mentions postcolonial theory only to dismiss it, arguing that the "English and Scots were always too close to the Irish to be thought of as colonizers in the classic model." But, whether one views Irish history through the lens of postcolonial theory or, as in Tillinghast's case, through the sad eyes of the elegist, it is apparent that in contemporary Ireland, as in the Ireland of twenty years ago, past and present still contend for a place in the sun.

CARVER'S DREAM

WILLIAM GIRALDI

Raymond Carver's story can be rehashed by rote by any semiserious student of twentieth-century American literature. Together with Hemingway and Flannery O'Connor, he is one of the three most important and influential story writers in American history. He transformed the literary landscape in the 1980s with tales of men and women struggling to pay the bills and

Sandra Lee Kleppe and Robert Miltner, eds., *New Paths to Raymond Carver: Critical Essays on His Life, Fiction, and Poetry*. University of South Carolina Press, 2008. 256 pages. \$39.95.

achieve love. Prior to his success he endured years of alcoholism, menial labor, and rabid unhappiness with a wife and with children that came too soon. And then came the "second life," after his alcoholism, that came too late, a second life that included his marriage to the writer Tess Gallagher and his friendships with Richard Ford and Tobias Wolff. Then arose the controversy involving Gordon Lish; the brouhaha over the term *minimalist*; followed by the cancer that killed him in 1988. He was fifty years old. His death is an incalculable loss to American literature and to the many hearts who called him beloved, a loss akin in magnitude to Anton Chekhov—Carver's hero—who died of consumption at the age of forty-four. To think of the stories Carver would have written had he lived, all that pleasure available to the people who needed it most, is to experience a ghastly shudder.

The studies of his life and work have been slow in coming out, and an authorized biography has yet to appear. This newest addition to the growing body of scholarship, *New Paths to Raymond Carver*, is unique in that its contributors take Carver's poetry seriously. That Carver preferred to think of himself as primarily a poet is only slightly less beguiling than, say, if the author of *Lolita* had chosen to introduce himself to strangers as a butterfly catcher. Carver's poems are not really poems but are instead short stories stripped to the barest essentials. They are driven mostly by the mechanisms of narrative instead of lyric in a free verse that, by definition, does not attend to form or structure. And a poet who is not conscious of form is akin to a driver who ignores traffic laws. Frost said that writing free verse is like playing tennis without a net, although he did not mean by this that all free verse is a wasted effort; if it were, we would have to consign *Leaves of Grass* to the trash heap. Carver, though, was no Whitman, and his verses are anemic as poetry. The editors of this present volume admit that Carver's poetry remains "understudied and undervalued," but this is for good reason. The poems are so bare, so forthright, so *obvious*, that there is very little poetical substance to study. Bringing high-minded criticism to them, as some of these scholars do, is comparable to hanging Christmas bulbs on a twig.

One can flip through Carver's collected poems, *All of Us*, and choose almost at random unexceptional lines from any of the early, middle, or late verse. Consider the second half of "Drinking While Driving":

I am happy
riding in a car with my brother
and drinking from a pint of Old Crow.
We do not have any place in mind to go,
we are just driving.
If I closed my eyes for a minute
I would be lost, yet
I could gladly lie down and sleep forever
beside this road.

My brother nudges me.
Any minute now, something will happen.

Those lines are indistinguishable from prose; their register is narrative, not lyrical or metrical. The line breaks are arbitrary. There is no tactical enjambement and so no internal tension, no self-contained and packed power that causes a poem to pulse, as in the sonnets of Milton and Hopkins. The personal pronouns force it to feel like one-half of a conversation at a pub. And so the poem is a loose and flimsy mini-story that cheats the reader because the real story happens after the last line ends. These are the last two stanzas of "Near Klamath":

We raise steaming cups of coffee
to our lips and we drink it
with both hands. But we are salmon

fishermen. And now we stamp our feet
on the snow and rocks and move upstream,
slowly, full of love, toward the still pools.

Take away the capricious line breaks and you are left with either the first or final paragraph of a Carver story. The majority of Carver's poems read the same way, as personal pronoun-driven anecdotes.

Those that don't read like prose notes read like something far worse—lists. (Catalogues appear in Homer and Virgil, but long narrative poems can accommodate such padding.) Robert Miltner cites lines from Carver's "The Car": "The car with a cracked windshield. / The car that threw a rod. / The car without brakes," and so on. Miltner defends the lines by contending that they offer "a litany of troubles . . . the sheer mass [of the list] becomes absurdly comical in effect." No, it doesn't; a list is a list, as devoid of poetry as the piece of paper your spouse sticks on the refrigerator. Miltner goes on to cite the many obvious similarities and repetitions in Carver's poems, though he has nothing to say about the lyrical or metrical process involved in the composition of the poems because there is none.

In the first essay Carver's widow, Tess Gallagher, tells us that Carver sometimes wrote two poems per day, a practice that was perhaps part of the problem: can you imagine Keats's writing the *Nightingale* and *Grecian Urn* odes in a single day? To tell two miniature stories per day requires little effort; to shape verse into a self-contained dynamic organism is a different matter altogether. Gallagher goes on to say that Carver's "music" is "so subtle in its chameleonlike ability to blend into its surroundings that some American critics have said this isn't poetry at all." Music aims to transform one's environment, as should poetry; for this reason Arthur Saltzman's comment that Carver's poetry "takes notice but stands clear" is not the compliment

he means it to be. What's the point of poetry that stands clear? Many of the poetry critics in this volume resort merely to summarizing Carver's poems because the poems are, like the best yarns, easily summarized. Try summarizing Arnold's "Dover Beach" and hear how ridiculous it sounds. Carver's poems don't sound ridiculous in summary because they are themselves summaries.

Some readers might think it conservative to assert that the only worthwhile verse wrestles the best words into a metric compaction that produces an aesthetic complexity. Why complexity? Because very few matters of the mind and heart are simple. Why aesthetic? Because the human animal revolts against the ugly. What makes a pretty poem? Sound attached to meaning. What creates that sound? Meter, form. Conservative though it may be, preferring metric structure over free verse has a long history of being argued for by poetry's most impressive minds. Robert Bridges—the poet responsible for delivering Hopkins to the world—wrote: "The difference between the rhythms of prose and verse is this, that poetry selects certain rhythms and makes systems of them, and these repeat themselves: and this is metre." The key word there is not *rhythms*, of which Carver has none of conscious intent, but *systems*. Bridges then quarrels convincingly against the perils of free verse, giving luminous examples by removing the meter from sections of *Paradise Lost* so lines will not scan, reducing them to rubbish. He outlines four "adverse conditions" caused by dismissing meter, one of which he calls "sameness of line structure." That is exactly the effect of so many of Carver's poems: a boring sameness of spoken English, a consummate lack of what Coleridge called, when defending meter, "vivifying language."

Tess Gallagher and the critics in *New Paths to Raymond Carver* defend Carver's employment of colloquial language in his verse, treating it as a badge of honor for the working-class poet—never mind how it turns the lines into scraps from a diary. The two behemoths of English romanticism butted heads over this matter of colloquialism in poetry. In his preface to *The Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth crowns himself the champion of commoners by referring repeatedly to what he calls "the language of men": don't worry, he says, in effect, I'm a poet of the people; you'll find no highfalutin vocabulary in my odes. Coleridge, in his *Biographia Literaria*, claims that Wordsworth is merely pandering to the masses, whom he calls "rustics." Coleridge singles out for special scorn this sentence by Wordsworth: "Between the language of prose and that of metrical composition, there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference." Carver would agree with that judgment, as did Blake, who claimed with characteristic madness that "Poetry Fetter'd Fetters the Human Race."

But Coleridge would have nothing of it. Wordsworth's language of men has no place in poetry because "the best part of human language . . . is derived from reflection on the acts of the mind itself. It is formed by a voluntary appropriation of fixed symbols to internal acts, to processes and results of

imagination." What makes poetry? *Ideas*. Matthew Arnold declares, "The greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life, to the question: How to live?" And that, finally, is what dooms Carver's poetry: a paucity of ideas, very few "acts of the mind," and little imagination. Carver in his poetry can't follow Shelley's injunction to "create anew the universe" because he is too busy cataloguing mundane details from a gray life. Carver is a poet not of mental or imaginative processes but of concrete nouns, which need no poet at all.

Bringing academic jargon to the apprehension of Carver's stories—as some of these scholars do—is comparable to strapping a brick to a bicycle wheel: it impedes the machine's performance. And the best of Carver's stories are perfect: "Fever," "Cathedral," "A Small, Good Thing." Some of the best studies published since Carver's death make no bones about placing Carver among the great writers of American literature. That he occupies such a place based on short stories alone is extraordinary.

Carver's contemporaries produced some outstanding stories, but few of them could match his hard-won pathos and technical mastery. Before Carver turned it into a cliché to present kitchen and bedroom dramas among the working and middle classes, his stories seemed to be delivering an America and American language that had hitherto gone undocumented. His cheerless tales of men and women suffering from the failure of the American dream have an inner life and reach conspicuously absent from his poems. It often takes some coaxing to get students—most of them the privileged offspring of wealthy parents—to stop seeing Carver's people as losers entirely responsible for their own addictions and anguish. They, too, have been brought up under the fallacy of the American dream but cannot yet see it as fallacious. And so they believe wholeheartedly in the cliché that if one can dream it, one can achieve it. They haven't yet encountered the world's destructive power; for them Carver's stories unfold in a faraway land where people are feeble and indolent. The good news is that they do not often view Carver's stories—as some critics do—as a sentimental working-class mythos. Critics who make such charges ignore Wallace Stevens's definition of sentimentality: "a failure of feeling." Say what you will about Carver's world: it does not fail in feeling.

In Carver's fiction the hardship is never romanticized because his men and women are still too close to ground zero; romanticizing takes hindsight. His characters cheat and drink because they're unemployed and disillusioned; they have lost God, and can find no one to sing for them. Marital infidelity is symptomatic of widespread misery. Stories such as "Chef's House" and "Vitamins" demonstrate that when Carver's people commit adultery they do so not because of reckless eroticism but because of existential desperation. Drunk and jobless, they are frantic for comfort that they cannot find through their spouses. If these men and women are not cheating each other or being separated, they have succumbed to middle-class attrition, and they

sit idly and numbly before the television, together but apart. What happened to their plans of happiness? American disappointment—it is everywhere in Carver.

The scholars in the second half of *New Paths to Raymond Carver* for the most part do an admirable job of examining Carver's stories. None of them considers thoroughly how Carver's despairing tales paradoxically offer occasions for hope. His men and women are coming apart, yes, but they come together as they do so. However feebly or inadequately they share in intimacy, they still attempt to connect, and it's that attempted connection that lifts the stories above a trendy nihilism and offers the pulses of hope. Carver's characters are not voodoo dolls fashioned for the sadomasochistic pleasure of their creator. Carver remains among the most beloved of American writers precisely because his work presents a profound humanity and care, a compassion for people and for living that prevails in the face of many inevitable shadows.

The Allen Tate Poetry Prize

for the finest poetry published
in this magazine in 2009
is being awarded to

Jayanta Mahapatra

for "Dreams of Iron and the Hurt of History."

The Andrew Lytle Fiction Prize

for the best story published
in this magazine in 2009
is being awarded to

Jacob White

for "Night Miles."