“CAR OF MY SLEEPLESS NIGHTS”: MOBILITY AND METAPHOR IN RAYMOND CARVER’S POETRY

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For twentieth century American writers, the car serves as a vehicle which is used both as a means of mobility and as a basis for metaphor. In an historical and technological sense, the car initially provided writers with access to otherwise inaccessible territory, especially as it did by providing new material for the Modernist writers of the first half of the century. In 1900, there were some eight thousand cars in America; by 1920, there were 10 million, more in the state of Kansas alone than in all of France; by 1980, the number of cars surpassed the number of households (Bryson 165-68, 343); the result, as language historian Bill Bryson observes, is that “no innovation in history has more swiftly captured the affections of humanity or more radically transformed the way the world looks, behaves, and operates” than the car (163).

Yet, even as the car was becoming ubiquitous, writers were realizing that the car could also become a way to express one’s extended sense of self, and thus would serve as an effective metaphor for understanding the relationship of humans to the larger world. K.T. Berger, in *Where the Road and the Sky Collide: America Through the Eyes of Its Drivers*, sees the relationship of humans and their cars not only as a symbiotic relationship, but also as a synthetic relationship, using the idea of “the new centaur” to denote this complex interrelationship: “Cars have become a second skin. When we climb into our cars and cinch ourselves into the seat belts it’s as though we’re literally putting on our cars, as we would a suit of clothes” (17). The car, perhaps the twentieth century’s dominant technological image prior to that of the computer, is a projection of self, either as mobility or metaphor, as American poet and short story writer Raymond Carver understood. In his poems, he rides the car as if it is the mechanical replacement for the horse on an epic, or comic

journey, using it as a means for escape from the routine of dull jobs, for transport to the woman of his dreams, for transformation of his personal circumstances, or for generating an inventory of ills that chants an incantation for change.

The car appears as a form of mobility in one of Carver's earliest poems from the 1960s, "Drinking While Driving." Bored, restless, aimless, Carver describes how he and his brother did "not have any particular place in mind to go,/ we are just driving," two Americans letting mobility be a means to any adventure, hoping that "Any minute now, something will happen." Carver demonstrates the concept of using the car to *go cruising*, to drive randomly looking for something to develop, for something to *find* beyond the events of their uneventful daily lives by looking outside of themselves, the car providing this kind of mobility and access. The car is a physical extension of our nation's insistence upon freedom, individualism, and independence, for, as David Halberstam notes, the car fits the nature of Americans who are "restless, independent, less rooted than other people" (15). The experience is thrilling, exciting, for Carver recalls feeling "happy/ riding in a car with my brother/ and drinking from a pint of Old Crow." It seems therefore evident that the two brothers are unaware that underlying this pseudo-quest, there may be nothing there, really:

> If I closed my eyes for a minute
> I would be lost, yet
> I could gladly lie down and sleep forever
> beside this road.

The idea of loss is further reinforced by the speaker's apology-of-sorts for having read only one book recently, *The Retreat from Moscow*, a title that both indicates failed campaigns and foreshadows the dangerous aimlessness of the two brothers who drink directly from the bottle they pass between them. As a teenager in Yakima, Washington, Carver liked to spend his time "rid[ing] around in cars with other guys" (McCaffery 114), during his "bozo" days of stealing hubcaps for kicks (Gallagher 9). Thus, for Carver, the car is a vehicle to open up new experiences that transcend the mundane, to expand the limitations of place, and to take the poet to new experiences which might otherwise not come to the poet. According to Carver:

> When I wrote [the poem] I was working an eight-to-five job in a more or less decent white collar position. But, as always with a full-time job, there was not enough time to go around. ... once or twice during that period I had ridden around at night with my brother in his car, both of us feeling aimless and hemmed in... ("On 'Drinking While Driving'" 105)

Here is the thrill of opening oneself up to the possibility of the new, the random experience that cruising brings, extending that sense of the ultimate adventure expressed by Dean Moriarty in Jack Kerouac's 1955 classic novel of the post-war generation's random traveling, *On the Road*:

> "Now, Sal, we're leaving everything behind us and entering a new and unknown phase of things. All the years and troubles and kicks—and now *this*! so we can safely think of nothing else and just go ahead with our faces stuck out like this, you see, and *understand* the world as, really and genuinely speaking, other Americans haven't done before us..." (226)

Randomly seeking the new world of what's around the next bend, over the next hill, behind the wheel of a car may be the last frontier left in America, as Kerouac's Moriarty suggests, yet there is, however, also a concurrent danger evident in the two brothers passing the bottle of alcohol back and forth in "Drinking While Driving," for the two brothers are *DUI*, or driving under the influence of alcohol with the potential for destruction as the vehicle, designed for transportation, transforms into a lethal weapon capable of *vehicular homicide.* Of course, the car can also be simply the means, the mobility, to homicide as well, as in Carver's short story "Tell the Women We're Going" in which Bill Jamison and Jerry Roberts, restless in their marriages and jobs, take a drive—while drinking—because, as Jerry tells Bill, "Guys got to get out," though their chance discovery of two young women just out for a bicycle ride ultimately leads to the girls' murder.

In "Waiting," Carver again uses the car as a means of mobility, this time as the literal vehicle which will take him to see the woman he loves. The poem acts as the kind of interior monologue one recites to oneself while driving, recalling verbal directions. The speaker begins by driving "Left off the highway and/ down the hill," continuing in a series of left turns, with the speaker advising himself to

> Keep going. Just before
> the road ends, there'll be
> another road. Take it
> and no other. Otherwise,
> you life will be ruined
> forever.

The urgency of avoiding potential ruin fuels the momentum of the poem, setting up the reader's expectations of the destination of this drive, the "house/ where trees are laden with/ fruit. Where phlox,

forsythia,/ and marigold grow." The romantic setting, enhanced by the image of fullness and ripeness with the trees bearing fruit, and the inventory of flowers which indicates a range of time—forsythia for spring, the varieties of phlox which bloom from spring into late summer, the fall colors of the marigolds—prepare both the reader and the speaker for arrival at the destination:

> the house where the woman
> stands in the doorway
> wearing sun in her hair. The one
> who's been waiting
> all this time.
> The woman who loves you.
> The one who can say,
> "What's kept you?"

The "waiting" operates on three levels here: first, in the mind of the writer who can't wait to get home to the woman he loves; second, in the mind of the woman who has been waiting for her lover; and third in the mind of the reader who "rides" in the car with the narrator, wondering where this "ride" is going and where it will arrive.

The reader can see Carver shifting from the car used merely as mobility to the car also used directly as metaphor in "Hope." Though the poem's narrator drives away from his wife and her boyfriend, his marriage ending, he drives away in the apparently run-down car, but as soon as the reader learns that the wife expects the narrator to "wreck the car," it becomes clear that the car which "was in [his] name" has become a metaphor for his life, suggesting that what she actually expects him to do is to wreck his life, one which "needed work anyway." Aimless, he left, and

> Then sped toward
> the state line. I *was* hell-bent.
> She was right to think so.

This is the speaker driving for the sheer feel of freedom he feels from escaping the moment. A similar scene occurs at the end of "Elephant," one of Carver's last short stories, as the nameless narrator, burdened by working himself into debt to support his mother, children, brother, ex-wife, finds his freedom by riding off into the mountains, a passenger in his coworker's car:

> "*Go*," I said. "What are you waiting for, George?" And that's when we really flew. Wind howled outside the windows. He had it floored, and we were going flat out. We streaked down that road in his big, unpaid-for car. (364)

In “Hope,” however, the narrator’s car/life did not wreck, the reader learns, but instead he

> kept going. Went
> a long way without stopping.
> Left the dogs, my friends, behind.

When the narrator returns “months, or years, later,” and is described as “driving a different car” *literally*, the reader sees that the narrator is also *figuratively* living a new life, one in which he is “Sober. Dressed in a clean shirt,/ pants, and boots.” The use of car imagery to describe a marital state is also used by Carver in the short story “Are These Actual Miles?” Leo and Toni, racing ahead of bankruptcy court, have to sell Toni’s convertible, much in the same way in which they must sell their pride to the courts in order to clear out their debts. After Toni returns home from selling the car, Leo looks at Toni while she is asleep, seeing her body as a road map and seeing their marriage through the metaphor of their car:

> [Leo] runs his fingers over her hips and feels the stretch marks there. They are like roads, and he traces them in her flesh. He runs his fingers back and forth, first one, then the another. They run everywhere in her flesh, dozens, perhaps hundreds of them. He remembers waking up in the morning after they bought the car, seeing it, there in the drive, in the sun, gleaming.

The body is therefore a highway, and their marriage, which was once romantically fresh and new, “gleaming,” is now sold off, gone, done for. As in the short stories “Are These Actual Miles” and “Elephant,” in the poem “Hope,” Raymond Carver brings the car into the poem, operating it both as mobility and as metaphor.

An obvious metaphor, in fact a collage, or rather barrage, of metaphors, is Carver’s humorous poem, “The Car.” On the surface, the poem looks like a list or inventory of all the broken-down cars one could own, a kind of personal used car lot.

> The car with a cracked windshield.
> The car that threw a rod.
> The car without brakes.
> The car with a faulty U-joint.
> The car with a hole in its radiator.

Some of the items on the poem’s list are familiar to most drivers, the “corroded battery cables,” the “front end out of alignment,” the “broken fan belt,” or the “hole in the muffler.” Other items are more extreme, such as the “steering problem,” the “blown head-gasket,” the “transmission trouble,” or the “twice-rebuilt engine.” A few items suggest narratives-in-the-making: “The car I picked peaches for,”

"The car I traded for a bicycle," "The car the child threw up in," or "The car my daughter wrecked." Yet some items border on the surreal: "The car I struck with a hammer," "The car that hit the dog and kept going," or "The car that left the restaurant without paying." Individually, each problem with the car is stressful, difficult, troubling, yet collectively, through the use of the car as an anaphora, the sheer mass becomes overstatement, comic, absurd. Part of the humor derives from personifying the car, making it responsible for things which the driver ought to be responsible. After all, it was the driver who left the restaurant, hit the dog and kept going, not the car, unless, of course, the car is considered metaphorically as an extension of the driver.

This "list" poem operates as an incantation, a chant, an attempt to cast some magical spell on the car, the object which the late French critic Roland Barthes has called "a purely magical object" (12). When our lives seem out of control, when the fates make us their sport, we pray for deliverance, as does the speaker in this case, incanting the automobile gods to take pity upon his wreck of a car. According to Jungian psychologist James Hillman, the car embodies our "dominant fantasy of self-determination" and is thus a part of our larger fantasy of individualization, of ego control, of control of our individual fate:

> I, the modern secular ego, is the self-moved mover, which is precisely what *automobile* means. As long as I am driving, the wheel in my hands; no matter the facts of death on the road, my fantasy assures me I have death in my control. (15)

Obviously, the speaker in this poem has absolutely no control over his life, since the car, an extension of his ego, is multitudinously broken down. In this case, without mobility, there can be no metaphor, without motion, there can be no control; the speaker therefore implores the gods—imagined almost as the Mr. Goodwrench of the universe—to *jumpstart* or *overhaul* his life, get it back on life's highway, as it were. This is precisely how, as modern mobile Americans, we see ourselves: we are our cars. Carver's poem "The Car" is therefore a kind of indirect address to himself, a poem which, on the one hand, is a send-up of a litany of self pitying woes, yet, on the other hand, it is just as equally an incantation for change, for control, for the empowerment of individual freedom. After all, if his car will not run, he cannot cruise. Just as in "Hope," the car functions as a metaphor for the life of the speaker in the poem. In "The Car," however, the speaker's life is an endless tale of hard luck, bad karma, of feeling literally *stuck,* with no means, no vehicle for escape. During

the years in which Carver struggled with establishing his career as a writer, he "never had a car that worked" (Gallagher 10), thus the image of the constantly-breaking-down, start-and-stop car works as an effective metaphor for a literary career with similar start-and-stop motions. Of course, when Carver did finally "arrive" on the literary scene, grants and lucrative contracts allowed him the means to purchase his first new car: a Mercedes he paid for in cash (Gallagher 11).

Mass production and affordability of the car provided Americans with a vehicle for public access, for mobility, and, for American poets, it offered a specific metaphor for expressing individualism and independence. As T.K. Berger observes, "We have merely inherited this world and so must turn to something as mundane, and perhaps superficial, as the car to fashion poetry and meaning in our lives" (32). Raymond Carver discovered poetry in the car and expressed it in his writing, using his poems as vehicles to vicariously carry readers along with him on the ride as he heads off down the road to where the sun shines, the road gleams, and poems are in the making.

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