“BAD RAYMOND” AND “THE DESPERADO MANDATE”: MASCULINITY IN RAYMOND CARVER’S EARLY POETRY

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In his early books of poems—*Near Klamath* (1968), *Winter Insomnia* (1970), *At Night the Salmon Move* (1976)—Raymond Carver presented the stereotypical masculine persona of his formative years during the 1950s: a young man given to drinking, working blue-collar jobs, hunting and fishing, posing as the “tough guy” engaged in the reckless, destructive behavior that dominated the first half of his life, the alcoholic “Bad Raymond” days that preceded his sobriety and his generous, reflective “Good Raymond” years which typify the work in his late books of poems—*Ultramarine* (1985), *Where Water Comes Together With Other Water* (1986), and *A New Path to the Waterfall* (1989).

Richard Ford recalls, in his memoir *Good Raymond,* those “Bad Raymond” days that characterized Carver in the late 1970s; his first impression of his friend in 1977 illustrates Carver’s economic status: “[h]is teeth needed work” and he “looked as if he’d just stepped down off a Greyhound bus from 1964” (np). Carver’s class status contributed to his behavior, for he was a child not of the economic boom that fueled middleclass growth and suburban living of the 1950s, but of its poverty. Carver grew up among the 25 percent of the 1950s’ population that was poor or working poor (Coontz 29), and in his essay “My Father’s Life,” he recalls the first house he grew up in Yakima, Washington, where “our toilet was the last outdoor one in the neighborhood” (79); no wonder, then, that Carver was quick to claim, “I’m a paid-in-full member of the working poor” (Gallagher 10). As an adolescent, Carver experienced the wildness of coming of age in the 1950s, what he called his “bozo days,” his “high-school times in Yakima—stealing hubcaps, hanging out with his pals Jerry King, Dick Miller, King Cook, and Lyle Rousseau” (Gallagher 9), and a New Year’s Eve when he “got horribly drunk, really drunk,” so much so that “people thought I had died” (Carver “Unpublished letter” 21).

Like others of his generation who grew up in the 1950s, he and his wife Maryann "married at a younger age [and] bore their children earlier and closer together" than their parents (Coontz 26); as a result, he experienced the same core problem of many working class families, the "failure to create harmonious gender roles" (Coontz 28). Struggling against the perceived restraints of the "unrelieved responsibility and permanent distraction" (Carver "Fires" 24) of raising children, coupled with his realization that "hard work and dreams [of economic success] were not enough" (25), Carver's rebellion and his frustrated acting out created his persona as "Bad Raymond." As his friend Richard Ford recalls,

> There was…a whole job set of "Bad Raymond" stories (his name for himself, a name he liked), tales from drinking days in San Francisco, Cupertino, Iowa City again: certain citizens struck with chairs; an inadvertent blow delivered to a certain vulnerable artery occasioning a race down to a city street to catch an injured party before he/she bled to death. Bankruptcy. Cars towed away, rows with everyone, unpaid debts, stolen checks, stolen kisses, stolen time. The old days. (np)

The fact that Carver "enjoyed telling [the "Bad Raymond" stories] them on himself" (Ford np) indicates his actions were by choice as much as by consequence.

The "Bad Raymond" persona closely echoes what Norman Mailer labeled in 1963 as "the desperado mandate" which presented a model of men who could

> fight well…love well and love many, be cool, be daring, be dashing, be wild, be wily, be resourceful, be a brave gun. And this myth, that each of us was born to be free, to wander, to have adventure and to grow on the waves of…the unexpected, had a force which could not be tamed. (Qtd. in Faludi 37)

As a product of the 1950s, the post-war era in which the U.S. had "a sense of itself as a *masculine* nation" (Faludi 16, her italics), the persona in Carver's early poems manifests many of the characteristics of Mailer's desperado mandate. Richard Ford's anecdote about his joking offer to shoot the troublesome boyfriend of Carver's daughter—an example of being daring, fighting well, being resourceful, and having an adventure—prompted Carver to "amplify life by seeing [Ford] as a *desperado*" (np, my italics), emphasizes the generational use of the term.

In many ways Raymond Carver's poetry typifies the realistic poetry that is central to contemporary to American literature. Expressing actual experiences and emotions, it uses personal anecdote and narrative, as well as the honesty of the lyric, to give common vernacular voice to the concerns of real people. Critic Jonathan Holden

believes such realism derives its impetus "from acts of exposure...of the hidden costs of middle-class comfort in American culture" (264); extending Holden's comment further, Carver's lyric-narrative poems can be seen as presenting a working-class *dis*comfort, as expressed through the desperado persona from "Carver Country." While there are traces of several characteristics of Mailer's desperado mandate in Carver's early poetry, this essay will limit its discussion to hard-drinking and wild-loving. "Drinking" is shown in "Drinking while Driving" (3), "Luck" (3-5), "Alcohol" (10-11) and mirrored in "Photograph of My Father in his Twenty-Second Year" (7) while the idea that men should "love well" is presented in "For Semra, with Martial Vigor"(11).[1]

"Drinking While Driving" presents youthful boasting, a kind of desperado bravado. Indicating his current state of affairs, the speaker of the poem apologizes for having only read *The Retreat from Moscow*, a title that both indicates failed campaigns and foreshadows the dangerous aimlessness of the speaker and his brother who drive purposelessly, and where "Any minute now, something will happen," including either possible excitement or a possible accident, though, as Arthur F. Bethea notes, "[a]lcoholism is steering the larger car of the speaker's life, and a crash is imminent" (211). The fact that the brothers are drinking directly from a pint bottle of Old Crow they seem to be passing back and forth suggests wild, hard-core drinking, while the possibility of danger is implied through the speaker's references to the way in which, if he closed his eyes he would be "lost" (as in lost at sea, or lost in an avalanche), and how he would "lie down" as if in death and "sleep forever." The problem, of course, is how to find oneself, and like most problem-solving for men who grew up during the 1950s, the speaker seems to knows that "[w]hatever troubles the American man, the outlets of mass culture from Hollywood to pop psychology to Madison Avenue tell him, can be cured by removing himself from society… by driving ever faster on an empty road" (Faludi 15). Still, despite the underlying menace of the situation, the speaker reports he is "happy / riding in a car with my brother" especially since "We do not have any place in mind to go, / we are just driving" and living fully in the moment and fulfilling his being born "to have adventure and to grow on the waves of…the unexpected," as desperados should.

Admitting that some of his poems have "at least a slender base in reality," Carver commented on the autobiographical nature of this poem in his essay "On 'Drinking While Driving'," discussing how in

[1] All page numbers for poems refer to *All of Us: The Collected Poems* by Raymond Carver. New York: Knopf, 1998.

the poem he is “presenting a sense of loss and faint desperation on the part of the narrator who seems—to me anyway—at dangerously loose ends” (179), that is, the hidden cost of working class discomfort, as Carver noted:

> 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 and working on a pint bottle of Old Crow. Anyway, there were these vaguely remembered facts or traces in my head, along with my own very real feelings of frustration at the time. (179-180)

Carver’s sense of aimlessness and frustration, and the temporary relief offered by “drinking and driving,” demonstrate his acting wild, daring, and the need to feel “free, to wander, to have adventure and to grow on the waves of…the unexpected” that are part of the desperado mandate.

Growing up in a house where alcohol is central to the family lifestyle can imprint and influence the child toward his adult life as an alcoholic, and “Luck” gives readers a tour of that home, showing the early influence of alcohol on Carver’s life, as he opens the poem by stating,

> I was nine years old.
> I had been around liquor
> all my life. My friends
> drank too, but they could handle it.

The separation of “all my life” after a line break from the word “liquor” indicates the long reach of that family influence. Certainly, there is wild drinking bravado of a nine year old who brags,

> I had a straight shot
> from the bottle, then
> a drink of warm collins mix,
> then another whiskey.

Such a description prepares the reader for the two brothers who pass the bottle of Jim Crow in “Drinking while Driving,” yet it also prepares the reader for the irony of what Carver calls the “luck” of the boy’s going from room to room after the party, helping himself to whatever is left around after the adults have left or passed out. Yet, when time passes and the boy is now a man, the picture shifts from social to private:

> Years later,
> I still wanted to give up
> friends, love, starry skies,

> for a house where no one
> was home, no one coming back,
> and all I could drink.

While the “lucky” moment of the boy’s drinking after his parent’s party is one of instant gratification, the sadness that reverberates both from the secretive excess of “all I could drink,” and the loneliness, is emphasized by Carver’s repetition of “no one” that concludes “Luck.” Arthur F. Bethea’s assertion that “Luck,” like “Drinking While Driving,” illustrates Peter Donahue’s claim that Carver presents alcoholism as “a kind of mind-enthralling ideological force” (211) that drives the actions of his characters or speakers in some of his poems. Given the boy speaker’s attraction to and early participation in the adult world of alcohol, it seems impossible to discount its force for “all [his] life.”

“Alcohol” is a then-and-now poem, a double mirror, a two-part poem in which the speaker shows one of the “problem[s] with alcohol”: that it creates an alternate yet powerful force that readjusts how we see reality under the influence and after. Part one offers a romantic view of wild loving, fueled by hard-drinking: the Citröen is exotic, part of the vision of “Paris; April 1934” to which the speaker is transported through time and space; the scene is idyllic as his actions are seen through a romantic, nostalgic gauze with its Delacroix brocaded drapery, red cummerbund, tarboosh and personal driver. Love is in the air, once let out of the bottle, as they drink and he “make[s] love” to “that pretty woman / [he’s] had and had all night,” celebrating the feats of the virile desperado speaker of the poem. But once sober, the veil parts and the gauze is removed, and the speaker experiences his epiphany: there is “a problem with alcohol, always alcohol” and the realization of “what [he’s] really done / and to someone else.” The speaker’s sense of disconnection from responsibility in part one of “Alcohol” perpetuates the myth of the desperado who “was born to be free, to wander, to have adventure and to grow on the waves of…the unexpected,” yet it displays as well the “uneasiness of self, time, emotionality, and social relationships with others” (Denzin 12) that characterize alcoholism.

Like the car in “Drinking While Driving,” the cars in “Alcohol” act both as vehicles of escape and as talismans, as highlighted in the shift between a woman in a Citröen in Paris in April 1934 and a woman in a dusty Ford in San Jose in a contemporary August; such a dichotomy emphasizes the disconnection between a world seen through the glow of alcohol and the dim reality of its hangover. Carver moves from his scene *noir* which begins when “the street lamps are lit” and ends “when the sun comes up over the Quarter / next morning” to the harsh light of afternoon with “sun striking/ the hood of a dusty

Ford" and readers note the kind of "disruptions in time and in narrative continuity that mirror the psychic state of the narrator [speaker in the poem]… intertwining the individual threads of their stories, rendering them oddly inseparable, fusing them" (Nesset 61), at least for the reader, though not for the narrator who seems to claim it is not a problem if "you don't remember. / You honestly don't remember." His belief that acknowledging the glare of the real, like the afternoon sun gleaming on the hood of the Ford, by his insertion of "honestly" into the repetition, compensates for the actions of a true desperado who is wily, resourceful, and cool. Still, as Bethea observes, "amnesia does not lessen his guilt" (210).

"Photograph of My Father in His Twenty-Second Year" is a poem Carver wrote "at a time when I found myself, like my dad, having trouble with alcohol. The poem was a way of trying to connect with him" ("My Father's Life" 85). Based on a photograph his mother gave him, the poem was first published in 1968, the year after his father's death, when Carver was thirty. Carefully divided into three five-line stanzas, the poem shows a formal respect that is inherent in the content. The first stanza presents Carver's father as he appears in the photograph, looking "embarrassed" and "sheepish," holding equally a string of perch and a bottle of beer, images of an American male represented by success at fishing and drinking. The second stanza shows his father trying to enact an image of how he wanted others to see him: he "would like to pose bluff and hearty" by leaning against the fender of a car, that symbol of escape from all troubles, with his hat "cocked over his ear" in a way that he believes makes him look cool and dashing, like "a brave gun," for "All his life my father wanted to be bold." Carver's father is constructing an image of manhood with its "essence…of selling the self" for "in the age of celebrity, the father has no body of knowledge or authority to transmit to his son" (Faludi 35), a point which seems reinforced in the final lines of the poem when Carver acknowledges necessary things his father did not teach him: "yet how can I say thank you, I who can't hold my liquor either, / and don't even know the places to fish?" The third stanza offers a reversal ("But"), showing how despite his father's posing, his eyes and hands "give him away" so that he "limply" offers the fish and the beer, weak images in contrast to the image of traditional masculinity, of boldness, he would like to project in the picture. Nevertheless, the poet still loves and respects his father, even though he himself, "who can't hold my liquor either," has concerns about possible alcoholism.

In his essay "My Father's Life," Carver discusses how he altered some realistic elements of "Photograph of My Father in His Twenty-Second Year," commenting

> The poem is true in its particulars, except that my dad died in June and not October, as the first word in the poem says. … I wanted a month appropriate to what I felt at the time I wrote the poem—a month of short days and failing light, smoke in the air, things perishing. June was summer nights and days, graduations, my wedding anniversary, the birthday of one of my children. June wasn't a month your father died in. (85-86).

Carver reconstructs the poem so that his father dies in the autumn, in a wise, patriarchal month fitting of a man who in 1964 suffered a breakdown and went through electroshock therapy (82) and who had "lost everything in that time—home, car, furniture" as well as his "good name," his self-respect and his virility (83), only to recover. In a moment of revelation, Carver express regrets about his father's passing: "I didn't have a chance to tell him…that I thought he was doing great at his new job. That I was proud of him for making a comeback" (84). Perhaps his father's comeback from many of the same problems that plagued Carver during his "Bad Raymond" days made him airbrush the memory in the poem so that he could, despite his loss, remain cool, a brave gun, a desperado still.

"For Semra, with Martial Vigor," which presents the idea of the man who can "Love well and love many," is a poem about "the combination of dating and drinking" with its "drunk speaker willing to say anything to get sex from a bar pickup" (Bethea 213). Of course, the desperado poet will need to be cool, daring, dashing, wily, resourceful, and wild to try to win Semra's affection, and, as a verbal sparring partner, he has met his match. In the ensuing dialogue, the speaker reveals his background as a working class poet, one who can do other things like "working in mills," "sweeping floors," and "picking fruit," but Semra quips that

> In my country she said
> someone who has been to college
> would never sweep floors

In a later exchange, after Semra asks if the speaker has been in the military, and they quibble over who should be in the military, he offers a volley of bravado:

> Well hell I said
> looking around for a saber
> drunk as a post
> damn their eyes retreat hell
> I just got here

Earlier, when the speaker offers to write a love poem, and writes her name on a napkin with a pencil, this witty, erotic dialogue occurs:

> Not now silly she said

nibbling my shoulder
I just wanted to see
Later? I said
putting my hand on her thigh
Later she said

Such stylistically talking back-and-forth dialogue hearkens to the work of Charles Bukowski, who was an early influence on Carver. Bukowski's work is characterized by conversational bar-talk in his distinct voice with its tough, machismo tone, often delivered by the drunken gambler and brawler who is valorized by the 1950s' culture as the epitome of masculinity. Poet and critic Hayden Carruth comments that Bukowski's poems "are full of stock figures from American Romanticism: noble drunks, sensitive whores, [and] downtrodden artists" (4), while poet Paul Hoover notes that the gritty rooming house lyricism of Bukowski's autobiographical narrative poems is influenced by Ernest Hemingway (one of Carver's major influences), "the most accessible modernist [who] provided Bukowski with a macho role model…and an experimental style already pushed in the direction of American speech" (56). What readers find in "For Semra, with Martial Vigor" is Carver's version of Bukowski's noble drunk and of Mailer's desperado, the dashing brave gun who fights well, albeit with teapots, and who is wily enough to win Semra, at least for the night. Then again, his victory could be his due to his loving well, for, as he tells us, "All poems are love poems."

Raymond Carver's early poems are a young man's poems, cultural statements that, through a gender studies lens, reveal much about men who came of age during the 1950s, a time of "relentless and self-conscious preoccupation with masculinity" (Gilbert 2). Some of that preoccupation developed into the tough veneer of Norman Mailer's desperado mandate and the issues that are at the center of many of the young Raymond Carver's poems, a number of which are connected to his actions that lead to the persona of "Bad Raymond" and his embracing that label. Yet the wild loving and hard drinking ran their course, eventually leading Carver to familial estrangement, divorce, and alcoholism before he achieved the sobriety that led to his "second life" as "Good Raymond," the recovering alcoholic, and his late poems which celebrate creativity, memory, relationships, aging and mortality. Nonetheless, readers and scholars of Carver's poetry need to embrace each of these two phases of his poetry so that the whole of his poetic oeuvre can be understood and appreciated. In doing so, the poems become valuable additions to gender studies, as they are documents and texts that offer examples of how poetry, at least in Carver's case, can show two phases of one writer's life:

1950s “Bad Raymond” masculinity with its Desperado Mandate and 1980s “Good Raymond” post-midlife masculinity.

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