

## On Raymond Carver with special reference to *Distance* (II)

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In the preceding chapter we have taken a broad view of the plot and metaphors of this story. So we will investigate the theme and implications of this story more minutely in the following chapters, and at the same time we will consider Carver's real intention of this story with the meaning of the title.

### II

The dark shadow stealing up to man's daily life becomes the theme of this story. The characteristic of Carver's style consists in dualism or multiplicity. In Carver's world, just as metallic fatigue each of which is harmless, unites into one and cracks one day, small disagreements accumulated in man's daily life give rise to a crack. However, Carver never states it definitely. At the same time Carver is obsessed with the belief that nothing in the world is filled with more dangers than the ordinary daily life of normal people, and that we live in the world where what was the whole of life yesterday becomes quite meaningless today.

The climax of this story is in the scene where the young couple begin to have breakfast after being reconciled to each other, that is, in the scene where the boy turns the plate into his lap by mistake. Certainly we sometimes fail to show usual skill. The scene of the boy turning the plate into his lap suggests that our daily life becomes miserable if we take a false step. As for the grown daughter Catherine, "she is a cool, slim, attractive girl, a survivor from top to bottom," but considering Carver's obsession that our daily life consists of some thin ice which is broken easily, the fact that she is "a survivor from top to bottom" is felt as if it were a miracle (the meaning of "survivor" is literally "one who escapes death"). But it is we, not the characters of this story that feel a miracle. They may feel it, but Carver never suggests it clearly, nor does it belong to the domain where Carver cannot relate it. According to a certain critic who compares Hemingway's style with Carver's, Hemingway's polished style suggests that seven-eighths of untold iceberg is below the surface of the water, while Carver's style makes us feel that the seven-eighths of the iceberg may not exist below the surface of the water or we may not be able to make sure of even the seven-eighths. In this work too, the narrator must lose his speech concerning the fact that she is "a survivor from top to bottom" is a miracle or a mere chance occurrence even though he relates the story. Only when the narrator can become dumb about it while he is relating the story, he can produce there what is told even if he is a deaf-mute. In other words, Carver talks about the privation of something, or something produces a kind of privation just because he talks about it in his peculiar way; talking itself makes

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a hollow or a gap. Therefore we will approach Carver's real intention of the story by filling up a hollow or a gap.

We have seen the miserable situation where the teen-age parents bandy words with each other concerning the fretful baby early in the morning, and the scene of the kettle whistling on the stove in the kitchen. Like the boy, we may turn the plate for breakfast by mistake. Then does the boy or the girl not turn the kettle out of his or her mind? Carver's works suggest the indications of destructions lurking dimly in our daily life. This "whistling kettle" is one of the indications of destructions. However, whether it is by a miracle or by accident, their family have escaped their destruction or death. "A survivor from top to bottom" is "one who escapes death." Moreover, the reunion and communion of the father and his daughter is set up on Christmas Day. Then did Carver depict "a man who escapes death," putting stress on a miracle or chance? The stress is, it seems, in the former because the father cannot efface the memory of "the whistling kettle on the stove" even on the holy day of the nativity of the Savior. Then what let them escape death? The boy, urged by the girl to choose Carl or the family, heads for Carl's house. On the way, he envies the "bright stars" which keep distance from the tension, the noise and the guilt in this world and glisten with an air of perfect composure. But he decides which to choose before he arrives there and asks for Carl's forgiveness for stopping hunting. And Carl says the words to forgive the non-fulfillment of the boy's promise, "It's cleared up. I don't look for much action this morning." But the words did not come out easily out of his lips. Before Carl mentions the words "It's cleared up." he must have had unpleasant feelings toward the boy. As the result of Carl's mental affliction, he finally said "It's cleared up." Getting Carl's forgiveness, the boy hastened to return home. Therefore, it is not chance but Carl's words that saved the young couple and the baby from the menace of the whistling kettle on the stove and the family crisis. What led Carl to say the words then? "a loss they both felt" after the father's death, it seems, led Carl to say "It's cleared up." In other words, the sense of loss by the father's death on the part of Carl made him say so. Because in male world, once man has made his promise, he cannot live any longer unless he keeps his promise, and nobody will have anything to do with him, so Carl, intending to protect the boy from other people, says, "Hey, don't let anybody ever tell you otherwise," adding to it "You're a lucky boy." Kirk Nasset quotes Carver's own explanations, "There are certain obsessions that I have and try to give voice to the relationships between men and women, why we oftentimes lose the things we put the most value on, . . . I'm also interested in survival, what people can do to raise themselves up when they've been laid low." and "Loss, mismanagement, survival: these are the hard cold facts of Carver's world."<sup>1</sup> Thus by Carl's sense of a loss, Carver has linked the fate of the family with death. As Graham Clarke correctly says, "Death frames Carver's world."<sup>2</sup> Carver is often called a writer who depicts "death" or "fatherless America," and this story shows such a typical pattern; the boy kills his father in the story by saying a few words "who was dead now," and instead lets Catherine live as literally a survivor.

The narrator (the father) tries to objectify the boy and the girl by using the frame technique and relating the third-person "fable.," Carver never mentions the names of the young couple though he gives names to the baby and the girl's sisters and the dead father's friend. Alain Arias-Misson says quite accurately that "Carver has not given a voice to his characters; he has given his characters to a voice."<sup>3</sup> However, the narrator cannot do so to the last. Though the father says, "Let's go to show you the city." by the daughter's request, he stays by the window, remembering the good old days, because perhaps he feels something in a scene of the past.

As for the episode of the Canada geese, it is clearly designed “to serve as an object lesson, a symbolic confirmation of love’s permanence to aid the young couple through difficult times.”<sup>4</sup> In spite of the words of oath in their young age that they will always be together, the father who was once a boy, is mateless himself in the apartment in Milan and has no relationship with other women, and lives a solitary life in human society. So this episode suggests their future. In this episode, Carver intimates the difference in views between the two of them, or a kind of distance between the two. In “good old days,” they had great ambitions and they were wild dreamers. “They were always talking about the things they were going to do and the places they were going to go.” But now he is left alone, and lives in the apartment on the Via Fabroni near the Cascina Gardens. In this work, Carver only depicts Catherine’s babyhood and growth, and does not tell us what happened to the young couple later, and whether the wife was dead or divorced him. The place where he lives lonely is the dirty back street in Milan far from America. How far from the wild dreams and ambitions in his young age it is! It is written in *Everything Stuck to Him* that the father and the daughter have a conversation in an apartment in Milan, but in this work Carver calls the place by name, and shows a sign of land. Thus such a man as seeks for a sign of land may search for a place to die in, for “as Hemingway correctly pointed out, all stories, if continued far enough, end in death.”<sup>5</sup>

### III

As we have seen, Carver, as usual, includes various implications and foreshadowings, and completes a splendid short story. In this story too, Carver suggests his obsession that we live in the world where the differences in views and trifle things accumulated in our daily life unite into one and crack one day, and where we are stuck in the mud by it, and that to think we are living a normal life is wrong, and we are walking, as it were, on thin ice and we always possess such a danger as we might break through the ice if a single misstep is taken.

It is often said that modern writers are very particular about their titles, and so is Carver. The title “Distance” includes, as above-mentioned, not only the feelings and longing of the boy who envies “bright stars” glistening in the air with an air of perfect composure, but also the young couple’s difference in views, the great distance from their dreams in their young age, and the distance and time and tide in which the boy wandered from America all the way to the lonesome back street in Milan. Including the whole lot of them Carver seems to have given the title to this story.

As above-mentioned, Carver entitles *Everything Stuck to Him* in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, but in this version, Carver does not depict the episode of the Canada geese, the conversation between the boy and Carl at Carl’s house, and the passage “After the father’s death, maybe trying to replace a loss they both felt, the boy and Sutherland had started hunting together.” though the father’s death is expressed. All things considered, we can feel Carver’s sanguine expectation to this story. Therefore it may be concluded that *Distance* in *Fires* is done better than *Everything Stuck to Him*.

## NOTES

- 1 . Cark Nasset, "This Word Love" : *Sexual Politics and Silence in Early Raymond Carver in American Literature*, Volume 63, Number 2, June 1991, (the Duke University Press, 1991), p.312.
- 2 . Graham Clarke, *Investing the Glimpse: Raymond Carver and the Syntax of Silence in The New American Literature since 1970*, ed. by Graham Clarke (Vision Press Ltd., England, 1990), p.100.
- 3 . See Marc Chenetier, *Living on / Off the "Reserve"; Performance, Interrogation, and Negativity in the Works of Raymond Carver*, in *Critical Angels; European Views of Contemporary American Literature* ed. by Marc Chenetier, (Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), p.169.
- 4 . Arthur M. Saltzman, *Understanding Raymond Carver*, (University of South Carolina, 1988), p.82.
- 5 . See Clarke, *op.cit.*, p.100.

(平成 4 年 9 月 1 日受理)