Some Considerations on Carver's *Fat*

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Many short stories which seem to make the main current in American literature in 1980's, especially in fiction, are called "Minimalism," or "K-Mart realism," "Blue collar realism," or "Diet-Pepsi realism" with some irony or sarcasm. Carver depicts, like a negative picture, the modern world in which the organic continuity going on with past, present and future is disconnected, and which loses general sense of unity and prospect, by shortening words, and by stories simplified to the extreme degree while excluding consciously the narrative deviation or degression which experimental writers liked, and by stories which depict only the much restricted terminal fragments in modern American life.

As for Carver's space of fiction, it becomes paraleled to the human relationship of characters, and is much limited one, such as a living room, a kitchen, a bedroom, someone's room, a garage, a garden, a neighbor's room and a restaurant at midnight. It is, as it were, rather an artificial space, and an inorganic space which chips the symbolic meaning as much as possible out of daily media installation. Avoiding the rhetorical expressions throughly, Carver lays emphasis on the inorganic surface of modern life. When it is complete, Carver's stories barely avoid what they speak eloquently. With that, it is absolutely impossible to summarize it in another word or say it in other words in spite of the concise and simple fiction. In other words, Carver depicts very featurelessly the mediocre people who are tied down to very tiresome daily life, but by prohibiting him to speak eloquently of his stories, Carver avoids the mediocrity of his stories themselves.

Fat we will deal with in this paper is indeed such a story, and is one of the stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976). When we read his short stories, we will notice a queer effect which issues from their superficial simplicity. However, the very simplicity contains a lot of implications, images and metaphors, which are inlaid here and there very skillfully. Indeed Carver himself puts it: "It's possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about common-place things and objects using common-place but precise language, and to endow those things—a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring—with immense, even startling power."[1] Therefore, by paying attention to "common-place things and object" with "immense, even startling power," and also to "common-place but precise language" with many implications and metaphors, we will examine what kind of world Carver intended to show us in the following chapters.

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1

In the opening scene, the narrator, who works for a restaurant as a waitress, is sitting over coffee and cigarettes at her friend Rita's room, and she is telling Rita about her mysterious attraction to a fat customer she has lately served. In this story, Carver uses the same frame-tale as *Distance*.

> It is late of a slow Wednesday when Herb seats the fat man at my station.
> This fat man is the fattest person I have ever seen, though he is neat-appearing and well dressed enough. Everything about him is big. But it is the fingers I remember best. When I stop at the table near his to see to the old couple, I first notice the fingers. They look three times the size of a normal person's fingers—long, thick, creamy fingers.[2]

Indeed he is the fattest person she has ever seen, but he is neat-appearing and well dressed. The waitress, stopping at the table near his to serve the old couple, notices the fingers which look three times as big as a normal person's fingers, and she sees to her other tables. When Leander has poured the fat man's water, the waitress gives him a lot of time to make up his mind before going over and speaks to him:

> Good evening, I say. May I serve you? I say.
> Rita, he was big, I mean big.
> Good evening, he says. Hellow. Yes, he says. I think we're ready to order now, he says.
> He has this way of speaking—strange, don't you know. And he makes a little puffing sound every so often.[3]

She explains Rita his way of speaking; he uses the royal "we," which he often repeats. Thus he orders the food:

> I think we will begin with a Caesar salad, he says. And then a bowl of soup with some extra bread and butter, if you please. The lamb chops, I believe, he says. And baked potato with sour cream. We'll see about dessert later. Thank you very much, he says, and hands me the menu.[4]

His verbal politeness like the sustained use of the royal "we," causes her to take interest in him. And she tells her friend that his fingers were terribly big. In this way, the waitress never fails to give her opinion after telling her friend about a passage of her tale, and goes on with her tale.

The waitress, hurrying away to the kitchen, hands in the order to Rudy, who lives and works with her. When she comes out of the kitchen, Margo, another waitress, who chases Rudy, says, "Who's your fat friend? He's really a fatty."[5] At this point, she also explains to Rita, "Now that's part of it. I think that is really part of it."[6] It is clear that the waitress tries to tell her friend about the significance of the tale of her incredibly fat customer, but she cannot clarify the reason why it has unsettled her so much. Indeed, when the waitress makes the Caesar salad at his table, the fat man watches her every move and makes that puffing noise. So she is so keyed up that she knocks over

his glass of water. She makes an apology to him, and he says, "It's nothing. It's all right. Don't worry about it. We don't mind."[7] Moreover, he smiles and waves his hand when she goes off, and she comes back to serve the salad, only to find the fat man has eaten all his bread and butter. A little later, when the waitress brings him more bread, he has eaten up the Caesar salad which is large in quantity, and says, "You're very kind. This bread is marvelous,"[8] adding "It's very good, and we mean that. We don't often enjoy bread like this."[9] The waitress asks him, "Where are you from?"[10] and he says, "Denver." In spite of her curiosity, she does not say anything more on the subject, and she goes off, saying "Your soup will be along in a few minutes,"[11] to put the finishing touches to the four businessmen who are very demanding. When she returns to serve his soup she sees "the bread has disappeared again. He is just putting the last piece of bread into his mouth."[12] He says, "Believe me, we don't eat like this all the time. You'll have to excuse us."[13] In response to his apology, the waitress says, "Don't think a thing about it, please. I like to see a man eat and enjoy himself."[14] In spite of her encouragement, he says that he does not know, but he arranges the napkin, picking up his spoon. Seeing the fat man, Leander, another waiter, whispers how he is fat. To Leander, the waitress criticizes bitterly, and puts down another basket of bread and more butter. This is the third time for her to bring him bread and butter! In response to his suggestion that it is better for him to take off his coat, the waitress agrees with him, "Go right ahead. A person has to be comfortable."[15] But she finds a little later that he is still wearing his coat. Here we will notice that the waitress is being attracted to the fat man gradually because of his surprising dignity and pleasantness which are so remarkable.

Meanwhile, by the time the waitress "serves the fat man his chops and baked potato, along with more bread and butter, he is the only one left."[16] The waitress tells him to enjoy his dinner and raises the lid of his sugar bowl and looks in. He nods and continues looking at her as before till she goes off. At this point, she confesses to her friend, "I know now I was after something. But I don't know what."[17] She knows she is concerned about and sympathizes with the fat man, but she cannot understand the real reason. Here, Harriet, another waiter, wonders if the fat man is going to run her legs off. Ignoring him, the waitress asks the fat man what he likes for dessert. In response to her question, he says he is not making them late, puffing and looking concerned. And she tells him to take his time. When he hears such words of hers, he requires his dessert:

> We'll be honest with you,. . . . We would like the Special, but we may have a dish of vanilla ice cream as well. With just a drop of chocolate syrup, if you please. We told you we were hungry.[18]

We have seen that he has let the waitress bring bread and butter five times, and we will understand that he falls a victim to his perverted appetite.

In order to look after his dessert herself, she goes off to the kitchen, and Rudy asks her if she got a fat man from the circus. Seeing Rudy have his apron and hat off, the waitress is disgusted with him:

> Rudy, he is fat, I say, but that is not the whole story.
> Rudy just laughs.
> Sounds to me like she's sweet on fat-stuff, he says.
> Better watch out, Rudy, says Joanne, who just that minute comes into the

kitchen.
I'm getting jealous, Rudy says to Joanne.[19]

Here we will notice that there is a gap between the waitress and Rudy, as Carver often writes the gap which emerges from the mere trifling events in our daily life. Rudy's joke that she is "sweet" on the fat man, it seems, leads "her to reevaluate her relationship with Rudy, who is similarly incapable of appreciating feelings she can hardly approximate."[20]

Thus the waitress sees after his dessert:

> Thank you, he says.
> You are very welcome, I say—and a feeling comes over me.
> Believe it or not, he says, we have not always eaten like this.
> Me, I eat and I eat and I can't gain, I say. I'd like to gain, I say.
> No, he says. If we had our choice, no. But there is no choice.
> Then he picks up his spoon and eats.[21]

Here we will see that the waitress is attracted to the fat man completely and that he is doomed to fall a victim to his appetite whether he likes it or not. Having listened to the tale so far, Rita says that the story is getting interesting. But the waitress, just saying that there is nothing else about the fat man, tells her friend about the story after she and Rudy go home.

Putting the water on to boil for tea and taking a shower at home, the waitress puts her hand on her middle and wonders what would happen if she had children and one of them turn out to look so fat. Here we will wonder why she thought of such an extraordinary idea of having children all of a sudden. At any rate, making two cups of tea, she takes the tray in to Rudy. As if he had been thinking about it, Rudy begins a story of a couple of fat guys when he was a child, and says he wishes he had their pictures. However, the waitress, now having empathized with the fat man, cannot think of anything to say, and they just drink their tea and go to bed pretty soon:

> I get into bed and move clear over to the edge and lie there on my stomach. But right away, as soon as he turns off the light and gets into bed, Rudy begins. I turn on my back and relax some, though it is against my will. But here is the thing. When he gets on me, I suddenly feel I am fat. I feel I am terribly fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all.[22]

At this point, we will notice some resemblance to the final scene in *So Much Water So Close to Home* by Carver:

> He says, "I think I know what you need."
> He reaches an arm around my waist and with his other hand he begins to unbutton my jacket and then he goes on to the buttons of my blouse.
> "First things first," he says. He says something else. But I don't need to listen. I can't hear a thing so much water going.
> "That's right," I say, finishing the buttons myself. "Before Dean comes. Hurry."[23]

Like Clare in *So Much Water So Close to Home*, the waitress gives herself to her husband though it

is against her will, and also cannot think of anything to say. Moreover, she feels she is so fat that "Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all," which shows that now she has empathized with the fat man. She feels just as Clare feels she does not need to listen to her husband and that she cannot hear a thing because so much water is going.

When the waitress has told Rita to this point about the fat man, she feels that Rita cannot understand the tale and her feelings though Rita says it is a funny story, and makes up her mind not to tell her any details because she has already told her too much. In spite of such feelings of the waitress, Rita "sits there waiting, her dainty fingers poking her hair."[24] And the waiter thinks she would like to know what Rita is waiting, and is enraged at Rita's insensibility. Thinking better of the matter, however, the waitress comes to a conclusion that her life is going to change, and that she feels it. In spite of her optimistic hope "My life is going to change. I feel it."[25] we will wonder if her life is really going to change. In the following chapter, we will examine the minute details about the waitress' hope to the future and her mental condition.

II

As we have seen, this is a frame-tale in which a waitress, who is greatly disillusioned with her job and marriage, tells her friend Rita her mysterious attraction to a fat customer she has recently served. Trying to find a clue to her attraction which she held to the fat man, the waitress says to her friend Rita, "I know now I was after something, but I don't know what." As the story goes on, we will notice that she is being suffocated by her husband Rudy with whom she both lives and works, and that the fat man offers to her everything Rudy lacks. Being polite, and "well dressed," the fat man is a kind of symbol of richness which makes the waitress' monotonous life seem poor and shabby.

In a sense, this story seems to be a simple symbol of another life and a means for revenge on the part of the waitress because it is slightly suggested that a liaison is going on between Rudy and another waitress Margo. As for the fat man, he is a being with whom the waitress identifies at the depth of her heart. Therefore, she becomes tense and turns over his glass of water when she serves him. Moreover, the sustained use of the royal "we," which is often on the fat man's lips, not only evokes the nobility and aristocratism which so move the waitress, but also "evokes a kind of complicity, a victimization common to fat man and waitress."[26] During one of their conversations different from the business of ordering and eating, the fat man, about the uncontrollable nature of his appetite, says, "If we had our choice, no. But there is no choice." These sentences symbolize her situation and environment. Indeed she knows she is after something, but she does not know what it is. In a sense, she feels something toward him instinctively. So she says to her husband to justify the fat man, "He is fat, but that is not the whole story." Just as the fat man is under the control of his appetite, she too is under the control of the world, surpressed by her husband and work environment which are insensitive to her needs and wants. Indeed she notices she shares the bed with a man with whom she has little in common, and with a man who is, like the party of the four businessmen she serves at her job, very demanding. Furthermore, when Rudy, in his talkative moment in the story, tells her wrong ideas about the fat guys of his childhood, she "can't think of

anything to say" and feels more distant from her husband than after meeting the fat man. So she drinks a cup of tea without exchanging any word, and moves "clear over to the edge." As she expects, however, Rudy begins lovemaking against her will. Rudy's compulsion of lovemaking affords the physical proof of what the fat man says earlier in this story.—"If we had our choice, no. But there is no choice." Thus she gives herself to her husband though she admits that it is against her will. Like Clare's sexual compliance in *So Much Water So Close to Home*, in which she identifies with the young girl raped and murdered at the river where her husband went fishing, such acceptance becomes a kind of violence which threatens to court death. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the waitress' vision of release comes to her during the act of sexual intercourse. The waitress says to her friend Rita, "When he gets on me, I suddenly feel fat. I feel I am terribly fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all." Wanting to escape her husband's suffocationg influence, her desire for liberty takes the form of a self-expansion which reduces the man getting on her, "shrinking him both in importance and size."[27] In short, the waitress who has been diminished by her husband gives him tit for tat in the very way she has been abused, summarizing her damages. It is true she is reduced to the nonentity, and gives herself to her husband by his violence, but she retaliates against him by reacting against her diminishment at the very place of violation in defiance of her husband's sexual violence. In a vision, the waiter transforms herself from self-repression to a mountain of self, and identifies herself with the fat man and his resolute world.

However, visions are not really escape routes, and Carver never gives his characters escape routes. Though this story gives her a kind of purification and compensation, it does not give her any means of settling the pressing matter of her unhappiness. She tells her friend Rita about her own tale in order to disperse disturbing details from her mind. But like Rita, who "doesn't know what to make of it," and who "sits there waiting" at the end of the story, expectant of some kind of clever and interpretative explanation, the waitress, oddly enough, is overwhelmed even when she expects the forecast about her future life. At the final line of the story, she says, "My life is going to change. I feel it." Does this mean that she perceives the possibility of pregnancy intuitively?—She has just described an act of sexual intercourse, and wondered earlier in the story "what would happen if [she] had children and one of them turned out to look like that, so fat." Even so, it suggests a kind of liberation, but also another kind of trap for her. "Her inarticulateness," Saltzman puts it, "stakes out the limits of her growth of consciousness. Significantly, although she believes her life will change —the meeting with the mysterious fat man surely heralds it—she still characterizes herself as passive, waiting for a transformation."[28] As Saltzman points out, the waitress' closing words dissemble such limits. What is the most important here is her passivity. As Nesset points out, the waitress says, "My life is going to change," instead of "I am going to change my life." It "is a rather different way of stating things. Verbal passivity is a close relative of passivity of action."[29] At the same time, the sentence suggests the passive part she plays in bed. What we feel after reading this story, after all, is that she will continue to be acted on instead of acting from now on. Like the fat man, who admits "A person has to be comfortable" and a victim of his appetite, cannot stop eating long enough to take off his coat, the waitress has not yet the capacity and insight for taking in the expansive and liberating self, whether she is comfortable or not.

III

As we have seen, in this story, as in many other stories, Carver explores that unfortunate and sometimes brutal reality. Like *So Much Water So Close to Home,* using a female first-person narrative voice, Carver depicts a story of love going sour—a love, though it is still fresh, which is on the point of turning as in *Neighbors.* Like *Distance*, this is a frame-tale, in which the waitress, disgusted with her job and her marriage, tells her friend about the mysterious attraction to the fat man she has recently served at her restaurant. As the story goes on, we notice gradually that the waitress is being stifled by her husband Rudy with whom she both lives and works, and that she is under the control of the world, supressed by her husband and work environment that are insensitive to her needs and wants. On the other hand, the fat man shows her everything her husband lacks —politeness, graciousness and articulateness, which make the waitress' own dull life poor and shabby. As the story goes on, the waitress is gradually more attracted by the fat man and identifies herself with him. In the final scene, she dares to receive her husband in spite of his sexual violence, but during their lovemaking, she retaliates against her husband by imagining herself to be so astonishingly fat that Rudy disappears within her bulk. And she says in the final line, "My life is going to change. I feel it." A certain critic points out, "Carver provides the ironical impression that all answers lie ahead while making sure we understand, as his characters should, that their most important elements lie somewhere before the pretexts he uses as events."[30] If so, we will conclude, as we discussed in the precedintg chapter, that the waitress will continue to be acted on instead of acting from now on, and that "insight extends no further than dissatisfaction."[31]

One of the main characteristics in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* is the issue of love and its absence, and the influence of love's absence on marriage and on the identities of individuals concerned. Another characteristic is the issue of language and its limitations, which are expressed in the stories as inarticulateness or brooding silence on the part of the characters. In spite of such limitations, Carver's is not a pessimistic world. "Raymond Carver's America is helpless," Michael Wood puts it, "clouded by pain and the loss of dreams, but it is not as fragile as it looks. It is a place of survivors and a place of stories."[32] The survivors talk however unsuccessfully they may do; they have sex, or avoid it. They use both their bodies and tongues in making efforts to find their real self again, "struggling to reassemble the bits and pieces of their tattered identities—and they continue struggling, even as their bodies get them into trouble, and as their tongues, taking them forever in circles, fall silent."[33] In this sense, it may safely be said that *Fat* is one of the typical stories in Carver's first collection of stories, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*

NOTES

1. Raymond Carver, *Fires; On Writing* (Alfred A Knopf, New York, 1983), p.15.
2. Raymond Carver, *Fat* in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (McGraw Hill Book Company, New York, 1978), p.1. Subsequent quotations from *Fat* will refer to this edition.
3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, pp.1-2.
5. *Ibid.*, p.2
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p.3.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*, p.5.
20. Arthur M. Saltzman, *Understanding Raymond Carver* (University of South Carolina, 1988), p.24.
21. Carver, *Fat*, p.5.
22. *Ibid.*, p.6.
23. Raymond Carver, *So Much Water So Close to Home* in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (Alrfred A. Knopf, New York, 1981), pp.87-88.
24. Carver, *Fat*, p.6.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Kirk Nesset, *"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), pp.298-299.
27. *Ibid.*, p.299.
28. Saltzman, *op. cit.*, p.24.
29. Nesset, *op. cit.*, p.301.
30. Marc Chénetier, *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 Chénetier (Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), p.176.
31. Saltzman, *op. cit.*, p.24.
32. Michael Wood, *"Stories Full of Edges and Silences"* (New York Times Book Review, 26 April, 1981), p.1.
33. Nesset, *op. cit.*, p.295.

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