Journal of Kawamura Gakuen Woman's Univ., Vol. 2, pp. 145–149, 1991

American Literary Realism in the 1980s

Part I: Raymond Carver and Tobias Wolff

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In his insightful study of American literary realism of the first eight decades of the twentieth century, Leo Braudy wrote that "literary terms like 'realist,' 'naturalist,' 'romantic,' or 'novelist of manners' can be constant, because they exist not in time but in the classroom." He went on to observe:

> Traditions live when writers use them, and the greater the writer, the more transformed and perfected will be the tradition. The American novel, unlike the more single-minded novelistic traditions of other countries, is absorptive and pluralistic. Even at its most verbally self-conscious, it maintains an effort to confront the entire country and to respect its spaces and the differences of its peoples for the opportunity they allow to build and to create.[1]

The course realistic fiction has taken in America in the 1980s sustains Braudy's contention. While a number of the writers he has surveyed are still active today, such as John Updike and, to a lesser extent, Wright Morris and Louis Auchincloss, a field of younger writers has emerged. Their work of the last decade places them within a literary tradition that has remained in America "at once more panoramic and more personal than either the English or the French."[2] Of these younger realists, Part I of this paper will discuss representative work of two: Raymond Carver (1938–1988), and Tobias Wolff (b. 1945).

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In a career cut short by his untimely death at the age of 50, Raymond Carver published ten books of poetry and short fiction. When his story, "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" was selected as one of the Best American Short Stories, in 1967, his career began a steady rise. He subsequently used that title for his first collection of short stories, published in 1976, and which was nominated for the 1977 National Book Award. After that came two other collections, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981) and *Cathedral* (1983), which was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award. Among the stories in *Cathedral* was "A Small, Good Thing," the winner of first prize in the 1983 O. Henry Awards.

As Carver's reputation grew in the United States, a number of his stories were selected for translation into Japanese by novelist Haruki Murakami, and they have since been published by Chuokoron-sha in two volumes.

It was also in 1983 that Carver was awarded the prestigious Mildred and Harold Strauss Living Award which provided a generous tax-free income for five years. Because one condition of this award was that he could have no other employment, Carver was compelled to leave his position as Professor of English in the writing program at New York's Syracuse University. At the time of the award Carver commented: "My favorite TV show in the 1950s was 'The Millionaire,' where once a week somebody would come around and deliver a check. This, to a degree, is what happened to me."[3]

His last collection of fiction, *Where I'm Calling From*, appeared just a few months before his death in 1988 and contained 37 stories, seven of which were previously uncollected. He decided against including all of his short stories in that volume because, he explained in an interview, "There are some I'm not particularly fond of and would not like to see reprinted again. I just picked up ones that I felt I could live with."[4]

As for Raymond Carver's fiction, it is notable for its remarkably spare style and for its subject matter which reflects a number of dominant social realities in modern America: the high rate of unemployment, the growth of fast food and discount enterprises, alcoholism, feminism, and an expanded blue collar ethic.

Many of his stories are set in the American northwest where the author, himself a native of the state of Oregon, grew up and lived intermittently throughout his life. In addition, the strains of Carver's own divorce and of overcoming alcoholism apparently influenced his work and lent it authenticity.

Carver's stories are distinguished by his concern for the psychic burdens his characters bear. For example, in "Careful," the protagonist is a champagne alcoholic who has left his wife in order to sort out his life, but slides farther downhill until he believes that while he

> wasn't in the habit of drinking from the bottle . . . it didn't seem that much out of the ordinary. He decided that even if he were to fall asleep sitting up on the sofa in the middle of the afternoon, it wouldn't be any more strange than somebody having to lie on his back for hours at a time.[5]

The title story, "Cathedral," is a reflective study of a blind man who is the houseguest of an old friend and her husband. This story reveals not only the tension the husband experiences in dealing with the guest ("A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to . . . I've never met, or personally known, anyone who was blind"), [6]but the gradual insights the husband gains during the encounter.

A generation ago, John Cheever, a master of the modern short story, was termed "The Chekhov of the Exurbs" by one critic, because of his skill at depicting life in suburban America. While Carver's and Cheever's subjects differ widely, the craft with which they chronicled their respective worlds is comparable, so that we might well consider Carver's achievement on a par with Cheever's.

This parallel takes on added dimension, in fact, when we consider that Carver's story, "The Train," (in *Cathedral*) is dedicated to Cheever and takes up where Cheever ended his 1954 masterpiece, "The Five-Forty-Eight." It is an effective sequel to the earlier story of a secretary's efforts to seek revenge on her employer for humiliating her, and does all the more to enhance Raymond Carver's position as John Cheever's successor.

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The youngest of the writers under consideration here is Tobias Wolff, a writer-in-residence at Syracuse University in New York state, and a colleague and friend of Carver's.

Wolff made his literary debut in 1976 when the *Atlantic Monthly* accepted the first story he submitted, an astonishing feat considering that the *Atlantic* only prints a dozen or so stories from over 6000 submitted annually. On the way to that first acceptance Wolff wrote for four years, during which, as he said in an interview, "I really subjected myself to a lot of self-censorship . . . I threw away everything I'd written—maybe twenty stories and a novel—until I had one I was happy enough with to send to a magazine."[7]

Since then Wolff has published widely, drawing on his varied experiences. He had, he explained,

> guessed ages and weights for a living, been a waiter and a busboy and a night watchman, spent several months as a reporter for the *Washington Post*, and four years in the army, including one year in Vietnam. The strange, nomadic, puzzling life I've led is my research.[8]

Wolff's "research" has led to some remarkable work, including a collection of stories, *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs* (1981); the novella and winner of the 1985 PEN/Faulkner Award, *The Barracks Thief* (1984); a second collection of short fiction, *Back in the World* (1985); and a memoir, *This Boy's Life* (1989).

The ten stories which comprise *Back in the World* are written wholly in the grain of contemporary American life. While the characters are quite diverse, they frequently share a sense of alienation or disillusionment. The title of this collection comes from a phrase commonly used by soldiers during the Vietnam War era to refer to their civilian future, and appears in the story, "Soldier's Joy." Late in that story the main character, a twenty-year veteran, reflects on his life: "We used to talk about how

when we got back in the world we were going to do this and we were going to do that. Back in the world we were going to have it made. But ever since then it's been nothing but confusion."[9] Confusion is not just reserved for the returning veteran, but affects many of the characters in this collection.

One very brief story, "Say Yes," focusses on how surprisingly easy a simple hypothetical conversation between a seemingly happily married couple can quickly turn malevolent. Wolff notes early in the piece:

> Sometimes his wife got this look where she pinched her brows together and bit her lower lip and stared down at something. When he saw her like this he knew he should keep his mouth shut, but he never did. Actually, it made him talk more. She had that look now.[10]

In "The Missing Person" we find Father Leo, a priest who had dreamed of "a life full of risk among people who needed him,"[11] but instead finds himself shunted through a series of unsatisfying assignments. The story ends with Father Leo stranded with no money in a Las Vegas hotel room, but finally facing a situation where he is needed. This story, like so many of Wolff's, trails off without a final, clear-cut resolution. As he once explained, "I try to pay the reader a compliment by leaving things to the imagination, by letting the reader make conclusions for himself."[12]

This is also the case with *The Barracks Thief*, which is set on an army base and concerns three soldiers awaiting orders to be sent to Vietnam. In the meantime, a series of thefts occur in their barracks, and Wolff sets about re-telling the incident from various viewpoints. Throughout, Wolff provides telling vignettes of even the minor characters, such as the clerk who "typed steadily away at some roster or report or maybe a letter to the girl he dreamed of—who, if he were lucky, kept a picture of him on her dresser, and looked at it sometimes."[13]

Raymond Carver once referred to Wolff as "a young master" whose work provides "a shock of amazement and recognition—and such pleasure."[14] It is also clear that Wolff, too, derives pleasure from his writing. As he said a few years ago, "You're only here once, so you'd be crazy not to do what you like doing. What I like doing is writing short stories."[15]

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notes

1. Leo Braudy, "Realists, Naturalists, and Novelists of Manners," in *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, ed. Daniel Hoffman (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 151.

2. Braudy, p. 84.
3. Kay Bonetti, "Ray Carver: Keeping It Short," *Saturday Review* (September/October 1983), p. 21.
4. Stewart Kellerman, "Grace Has Come Into My Life," *New York Times* (15 May 1988), p. 40.
5. Raymond Carver, "Careful," in *Where I'm Calling From* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988), p. 207.
6. Carver, "Cathedral," in *Where I'm Calling From*, p. 266.
7. John Blades, "Behind the Cover," *Chicago Tribune* (8 December 1985), p. 3.
8. Tobias Wolff, quoted in press release for *Back in the World*, Houghton Mifflin Company (15 October 1985), p. 2.
9. Wolff, "Soldier's Joy," in *Back in the World* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), p. 116.
10. Wolff, "Say Yes," in *Back in the World*, p. 57.
11. Wolff, "The Missing Person," in *Back in the World*, p. 19.
12. Bill Broadway, "Wolff's Upbeat Stories Describe Down Side of Life," *Atlanta Journal/ Atlanta Constitution* (8 December 1985), p. 1.
13. Wolff, *The Barracks Thief* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), p. 27.
14. Raymond Carver, quoted in press release for *Back in the World*, p. 2
15. Blades, p. 3.