CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY: RELIGIOUS REVISION IN RAYMOND CARVER’S “CATHEDRAL”

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Between the versions of “Cathedral” that Atlantic Monthly published in 1981 and that Knopf published in Cathedral in 1983 (the same version that appears in the Vintage 1984 release), Raymond Carver made more than two hundred revisions.1 These amendments range from simple hyphenation—say from “social service department” (1981, 23) to “social-service department” (1984, 210)—to entire new sentences and deletions of phrases, a common practice for Carver: “Fragments become complete sentences and awkward locutions are smoothed over or excised” (Bugeja 74). But Carver’s changes in “Cathedral” constitute much more than polishing; in fact, by examining the major revisions in characterization and word choice, we begin to see very different characters: the blind man becomes more distant and authoritative, while the narrator trajects into ignorance. Carver’s specific revisions ultimately bring about a new discourse on religion, one not afforded it by critics: in the earlier version, we can doubt the narrator’s “leap of faith” as an utterance out of obligation to the unaware, too close to home blind man, but in the later version, the narrator’s ignorance played against the blind man’s removed intelligence makes the ending all the more surprising—and finally effective, in comparison.

But should we need another version to demonstrate the ending’s efficacy? Critics have always assumed the ending as an epiphany, and that “Cathedral” also remains one of Carver’s most famous stories indicates the urgency of reexamining the coup de grace. Bugeja sees the story’s importance as “resist[ing] the sense of tragedy so prevalent in” other selections in the volume (82); Hathcock locates in its characters “the potential power . . . to reconstruct their lives through language” (31). Both critics lend the story specific power, turning on the ending to interrogate different discourses—Carver’s style and linguistics, respectively. And though critics disagree as to whether the story promotes “an effort on Carver’s part to transcend his medium” (Goodheart 25), communion, or just understanding—which they all believe would be a leap in and of itself for the narrator (I tend to agree)—none can offer an explanation of Carver’s change of heart, his much-quoted “opening up.” Sure, Bullock, in his short yet wonderful analysis, may conclude that “Carver is using the metaphor of the cathedral to present a
possibility beyond the confines of the conventional socialization of the masculine ego" (349); and Nesset can, rightfully I think, claim that “Carver implies [that] it is through our collaboration with others that we free ourselves from the slavery of self-absorption” (127). Again, these critics assign a power to the ending — to break down male social formations and to break out of egotistical introspection. While providing solid introductions into multiple discourses, these critics’ theses do little to explain the conditions of possibility of the revelation itself. They discuss and problematize the effects of the revelation and textual evidence that leads to those conclusions, but not the engendering issues of the potentiality itself. By taking the story’s ending for granted, in other words, critics have excluded the authorial, textual, and religious conditions that make possible the narrator’s phenomenal final phrase. Only in comparing the two versions can we argue Carver’s agenda for the story’s triumph: for a religious revision (or the horribly clichéd “leap of faith”) to occur, one must approach the subject openly — even if that openness takes the form of ignorance — and in the presence of (a) distanced authority. Mere obligation and assumed knowledge, the trademarks of the early version’s narrator, do not add up to a convincing religious awakening. In the later version, the blind man’s becoming more of an authority and more distanced (making him a greater authority) and the narrator’s appearing more ignorant (and perhaps more open) push the story towards a more credible, if not remarkable, religious revelation, even if the narrator cannot fully participate in that (re)vision. This discourse speaks directly to the conditions that make the ending possible, interrogating criticism that relies on an assumed interpretation of the story’s finale.

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In considering the narrator’s (re)vision, Bullock and Nesset avoid the recourse many of the rest of the critics take, that of authorial intent. Justifying their individual arguments, these latter critics all quote the same Carver interview (the same source of the “opening up”), a portion of which I reproduce here:

Carver answered Mona Simpson’s question “Are you religious?” by saying, “No, but I have to believe in miracles and the possibility of resurrection.”

(Fires 206, quoted in Hathcock 39)

Hathcock applies this information by concluding that “we see Carver...