

***Four Female Voices in “Fever”:
Introduction to Feminism and Carver***

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Feminism, both as a social movement and in its prolific theoretical writings, spanned two decades that coincided with a major part of Carver’s work, yet any explicit reference to it is absent from his writings, as is the word feminism itself. This does not preclude Carver’s intimation of its thrust and influence on the lives of his characters, caught in the invisible stir of its undercurrents. Hostile to theoretical and ideological abstractions, Carver is drawn to the movement in which the phenomenon of feminism discloses itself, the thud and impact of its collision with normative gender roles and thinking. Far from viewing Carver—whose work contains no overt politics or explicit concern with social issues or movements—as an engaged theorist, therefore, this issue focuses on his capacity to eavesdrop or peer into the powerful social forces feminism unleashed and which his characters, in their search for identity and self-knowledge, are groping to articulate and come to terms with.

In dramatizing the above forces, Carver’s consummate technique evokes Bakhtin, for whom “The novel must represent all the social and ideological voices of its era,” yet it must do so not in a single-voiced or “unitary language,” but in dialogized discourse, where “the image of a man” gives way to “the image of the language”: “Characteristic for the novel as a genre is not the image of a man in his own right, but precisely the *image of a language*. But in order that language become an artistic image, it must become speech from speaking lips, conjoined with the image of a speaking person” (367, 336). The result is a “diversity of social speech types...and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (262). It is also

Carver's formula for eschewing ideological abstractions. Far from being a mouthpiece of feminism's ideas—as advocate or adversary—Carver attributes “speaking lips” to its forces at work through a polyphonic orchestration of dominant, minor, or muffled voices, as well as intervening silences pregnant with significance.

Illustrating Carver's discourse on feminism through a plurality of “speech types” is “Fever,” the story in which the protagonist, Carlyle, abandoned by his wife Eileen, is confronted to four females belonging to age groups that span three generations: the late adolescent Debbie, whom Carlyle took as a babysitter “in desperation to find someone” the day before resuming his teaching job (158); Carol, the secretary he works and occasionally has sex with; Eileen, whose absence he is trying to get over; Mrs. Webster, the elderly babysitter he can finally “count on” at the end of the story and whose authenticity of feeling and expression have the maieutic function of helping him express his feelings as well, thus overcoming his crisis and moving on to another phase in his life.

As suggested in the lexicological resonance of Mrs. Webster's name, the story has much to do with language. The four women are not given any psychological ‘depth’ according to the conventions of realism. Rather, a profile of each emerges through the speech type Carver attributes to them. When that speech is one's own, as is that of Mrs. Webster, it pre-supposes a self-knowledge that permits one to exist authentically as well as connect with the world of others. The unripe Debbie is thus disastrous for his children, abandoned on the lawn the first day Carlyle comes back from work, while “[i]n the living room with three teenaged boys” and her “blouse...unbuttoned,” Debbie's voice is muted by “Rod Stewart scream[ing] from the stereo,” a metaphor for the teenage sub-culture that exerts its total influence on her immature self (158-59).

Speaking in the clichés and stereotyped phrases of TV series, the older Carol's “voice,” we are told, “sounded indistinct” (161). To convey the hollowness of her utterance,

her response to Carlyle's story of the incident with Debbie is parodied in the third person: "Did he want her to come over to his place? she asked...He shouldn't be afraid to say when he needed affection, she said" (161). Switching to direct discourse, her speech continues to echo sentimental stock phrases void of honest feeling: "Sweetie, I'm sorry about about what happened. But I understand your wanting to be alone. I respect that.... Honey, don't let it get you down" (161). Infected by her jargon, Carlyle finds himself responding similarly: "Thanks again for being there when I need you...You're one in a million, you know" (161). The ring of insincerity in his own words makes him regret not having "thought of something else to say to her instead of what he'd just said. He'd never talked that way before in his life" (161).

Carlyle was apparently sidetracked into sentimental jargon that is neither his nor the path to an authentic relation with Carol, who remains marginal in his life. Neither Debbie nor Carol, finally, have any identity of their own—much less any insight into their feminine condition.

Set off against the undeveloped voice of Debbie and the "indistinct" voice of Carol, Eileen's voice, resounding through her frequent calls from California, has a volume and a *vibrato* all her own, as distinct from Carol's blandness as is her excessive volubility and 'fevered' exhilaration which exacerbate Carlyle's pain instead of soothing or healing it. For all its richer-sounding and sophisticated expression, however, Eileen's language is no less an amalgam of stereotypical phrases that are difficult to demarcate from what might be her own utterance, as they also mark its disjunction from the real: "We have to keep all lines of communication open," she tells Carlyle although in fact she never communicates substantially with him or the children. "I think the worst is over. For both of us. I've suffered too" (168). Exulting in her decision to emancipate herself from them, however, Eileen never sounds as if she has suffered, and the worst is far from over for Carlyle and the children she left behind.

At the root of the ferment and buoyancy that immunize Eileen to the wounds of others is the awakening of her past ambitions to realize herself as an artist: "In college, she had

majored in art, and even though she'd agreed to marry him, she said she intended to do something with her talent. Carlyle said he wouldn't have it any other way. She owed it to herself, he said. She owed it to both of them.... Then, after eight years of being married to him, Eileen had pulled out. She was, she said in her letter, 'going for it'"—"it" being the talent she prioritizes over motherhood: "Tell Keith and Sarah I love them. Tell them I'm sending some more pictures. Tell them that. I don't want them to forget their mother is an artist. Maybe not a great artist yet, that's not important. But, you know, an artist. It's important they shouldn't forget that" (164-65, 167).

One wonders how genuine Eileen's talent is when she sends them a photograph of herself "in a big, floppy hat, wearing a bathing suit" or "a pencil drawing...of a woman on a riverbank in a filmy gown, her hands covering her eyes, her shoulders slumped. It was, Carlyle assumed, Eileen showing her heartbreak over the situation" (164). Vaguely evocative of the David Hamilton photographs in vogue at the time, both show Eileen posing, imitating, or consuming a stereotyped caricature of a female "artist."

The words of a speaking person, writes Bakhtin, "are always *ideologemes*," carriers of an ideological discourse rather than neutral, ever registering "with extreme subtlety the tiniest shifts and oscillations of the social atmosphere" (300). Accordingly, one is tempted to see Eileen's decision to "unbond" or free herself from marriage as inspired, if not induced, by a certain social climate permeated by feminist ideology during the 70s and 80s. It is at least suggested in her expression "go for it" as well as in Carlyle's own justification, "she owed it to herself. She owed it to both of them," valorizing an emancipatory drive toward self-realization that was at the heart of feminism—its credo. In their respective professions as teacher of art and artist, their education, as well as in their adherence to a social milieu that distinguishes them from the working-class Carol, both Carlyle and Eileen could not but have

strongly felt the movement's force and influence. Carlyle may also be hinting as much when, during an art lesson on Byzantine paintings, "he took so long trying to place the anonymous artists in their *social milieu* that some of his students began to scrape their shoes on the floor, or else clear their throats" (my emphasis, 172). Are the students impatient, or even embarrassed, because Carlyle's preoccupation is personal, having to do with the "anonymous artist" in his own life rather than the milieu's pertinence to understanding Byzantine artists? If so, the above may be Carver's wink to the reader. Interestingly, no "ideologemes" in Carol's speech show that feminist ideas had yet seeped into the consciousness of her "social milieu."

Although the connection with feminism is never made explicit, it suffices to point out that Eileen *embodies* emancipation from the domestic sphere. Concerned as Carver is with living persons in real-life situations, however, he shows that principle in conflict with Eileen's responsibilities as a mother. In so far as Carlyle has a more developed 'motherly instinct' than Eileen, who seems to have none, or lost it in the process of emancipation, "Fever" upsets the myth of women as having a greater capacity to care for and connect with others, a capacity that is apparently not linked to gender.

As if to complicate the above question concerning gender, however, Carlyle will later tell Mrs. Webster that Eileen was not always the callous wife and mother she has now become: "Mrs. Webster, there's something I want you to know. For a long time, my wife and I loved each other more than anything or anybody in the world. And that includes the children" (184). Carlyle furthermore recalls that Eileen's voice was once also different: "He longed to hear her voice—sweet, steady, not manic as it had been for months now..." (166) Etymologically, "manic," from *mania* 'madness,' connects with *maenad*, 'bacchante,' which *Merriam Webster* defines as "an unnaturally excited or distraught woman." Invoking the frenzied women of all ages who left their homes to follow Bacchus in Euripides' eponymic *Bacchae*, maenad/manic also coheres with Carlyle's frequent repetition of Eileen as "crazy"

or losing her senses: “She *was* losing her mind. That much was clear to him” (166). Having dislodged herself from the past as well as present reality, Eileen is locked within a narcissistic image of herself as an “artist” that de-sensitizes her to the suffering she has caused her family, making her no longer someone Carlyle can “count” or *lean on* (Ei-leen).

From my above arguments, one may easily conclude that feminism was responsible for Eileen’s flight from her commitment to Carlyle and her children, the pain she inflicted on both, the radical change her voice underwent from “sweet, steady” to “manic.” To do so, however, is to accuse Carver of furthering clichés often heard about feminism’s ‘devastating effect,’ the ‘havoc’ it wreaked on marriages and society as a whole—which Carver does not do. Had that been his ‘intention,’ he might have ended his narrative with Eileen rather than with the fourth and last female of Mrs. Webster, as he does. In a story structured like a musical fugue, where four successive voices contrast as they illumine and intertwine with each other, it would be remiss to conclude anything before the last voice has also been heard.

In counterpoint to the preceding females, therefore, but especially to Eileen’s wanting commitment to others, we learn that Mrs. Webster has not only been a substitute mother for Carlyle’s children, who “thrived under [her] attentions” (175). She appears to have had the same role for her husband’s “son by a former marriage” when she consents “to help him with his mink ranch” by moving to Oregon at the end of the story (182). Keeping her commitment to Carlyle, however, she will not go away before helping him come to terms with the aching memory of Eileen in the past by enabling him to “talk” about it: “Go on...I know what you’re saying. You just keep talking, Mr. Carlyle. Sometimes it’s good to talk about it. Sometimes it has to be talked about. Besides, I want to hear it. And you’re going to feel better afterwards” (185). Her conclusion, after hearing the story of Eileen’s disconnection from her former self,

surprises the reader: “You’re made out of good stuff. And so is she—so is Mrs. Carlyle. And don’t you forget it. You’re both going to be okay after this is over” (185).

How can Mrs. Webster be so affirmative about Eileen’s ultimate resolution of her now broken self? In my view, one way of answering this question is by focusing on Eileen and Mrs. Webster as “speaking lips” for the movement of feminism. In her transformation from a girl of “eighteen...burning with” love for Carlyle into the unfeeling wife and mother we have heard on the phone, Eileen is shown in the *process of becoming* another woman through her appropriation of feminist discourse (184). Responding to the initial *jolt* of the feminist movement, however, Eileen is galvanized by its liberating force alone, its thrust blinding her to the responsibilities that inexorably come with freedom. Eileen’s assimilation thus remains incomplete, suspended at a moment before its productive nature has *disclosed* itself to her in the clear light of its plenitude. In accepting to move to Oregon to help her husband’s son, an act that is symbolic of the commitment to others that Eileen dodges, Mrs. Webster comes to fill the *lacuna* in Eileen’s unfinished—abortive—appropriation of feminism’s full message. A figure of maturity and wisdom, Mrs. Webster thus embodies the last phase of the movement, a function that also sheds light on her previous prophetic statement about Eileen being made of “good stuff”: Eileen too, and women like her we presume, will be “okay,” when all the dust from the seismic eruption of a powerful movement such as feminism settles, once she has appropriated its utterance to the end.

Not surprisingly, of the four consecutive females Carlyle turns to in his period of trial, Mrs. Webster is the only one he can finally communicate with, the only one who *hears* him. In sharp contrast to Eileen’s babble about how to “stay in touch” or “keep all lines of communication open,” aims she never achieves, Mrs. Webster’s voice, steady and reassuring as opposed to the febrility in Eileen’s, is the only one that soothes and heals him from the “fever” he has succumbed to at the closing of the story. Significantly, her feminine voice is

the one the story ends with, investing her with the role of representing the maturity needed to integrate feminism's principles without severing herself from others. With her, feminism has come to fruition, its message assimilated so as to become productive, caring, healing and, above all, capable of reconciling the two sexes to each other. If it was 'negative' in the early phase which Eileen embodies, it is because it *had* to be disruptive of a certain order before that order became re-established on new social grounds. In their age sequence, therefore, the four women and their voices fuse into one Woman, fractured *in time* so as to simultaneously represent feminism's moving process, from the inchoate Debbie to the ripeness and sagacity of one who has the name—and authority—of the dictionary. Thus has Carver, in his intuitive grasp of the feminist movement, nestled it in its "temporality," or its "historicity," both constitutive of its essence or "Being" (Heidegger 62, 63).¹

In conclusion, focusing briefly on a single story, as I have done, may not be within the scope of a general 'introduction' to the essays that follow. Yet, it was my reading of those essays, their penetrating ideas infecting my own, that incited me to re-vision one narrative in light of their import, consequently adding my voice to theirs. By extension, the clear focus of the feminist lens found in this issue's writings as well as its axial references to the real world will hopefully invite other readers to do the same. In joining their voices to ours, they simultaneously respond to Carver's invitation to participate in a process which he neither names nor gives ideological unity to and which, in its openness, is analogous to the "process" characterizing his own writing in its endless revisions: "Maybe I revise because it gradually takes me into the heart of what the story is *about*. I have to keep trying to see if I can find that out. It's a process more than a fixed position" (*Fires* 218). This introduction then can only express my gratitude to the contributors for initiating a similar process of re-vision or re-

reading of his work as they welcome an open dialog between their discriminating views on feminism and those of our readers.

Notes

ⁱ In *Being and Time* Martin Heidegger writes: “The fundamental ontological task of the interpretation of Being as such...includes the elaboration of the *Temporality of Being*.... Being is comprehensible only on the basis of the consideration of time...” (62)

Works Cited

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