PARADIGMS OF AUTHORITY
IN THE
CARVER CANON

Thesis Booklet

Szeged – 2010
OBJECTIVES

At the center of interest of the present dissertation is a tool of representation, *reduction* that seems strikingly efficient when describing a particular writing strategy, *literary minimalism* but becomes rather elusive once we aim at defining it. Therefore the argumentation sets out to present reduction in a particular context in which it is illuminated by a unique phenomenon of latter-day literary history, that of the controversy dominating Raymond Carver’s reception.

What has become known as the Carver controversy, a set of unsettling concerns about the extent and the aesthetic merits of the contributions of Carver’s influential editor, Gordon Lish to the writer’s first two major collections, now seems to dominate Carver’s reception and to give rise to a narrative in which the act of writing and the creation of a writer’s legacy are seen as collective social acts of manufacturing. The eventful narrative begins with Lish’s influence first appearing as a literary rumor, then coming to light in 1998 in a *New Yorker* article, that is followed by more than a decade of scholarly agitation in which Carver is either reconsidered as a minimalist writer or questioned as a writer with an authentic voice. The narrative ends with the controversy resulting in the active recreation of the writer’s literary canon in 2009.

The Library of America, the publisher set out to document the literary heritage of the United States by editing and publishing canonical volumes of collected writings by classics of American literature, published the canonical volume of *Collected Stories* by Raymond Carver. The collection, edited by Stull & Carrol, featured an unusual parallel publication of different versions of some of his signature stories by including the manuscript version of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love (WWTA)*, the volume that brought wide recognition to the writer in 1981, under the title *Beginners*. The parallel publication of the two
collections clearly brings Carver’s more minimalist texts back into the focus of attention. After the years of scholarly agitation created by the controversy, during which the first, larger half of the writer’s career was increasingly neglected due to concerns about his authority over the early stories, the publication of the canonical collection can be regarded as a new chapter in Carver’s publication and reception history.

Discussions about the influence of the new canon on the evaluation of the writer’s work and his literary merits, as well as about the theoretical corollaries of his unusual cooperation with his editor are likely to be dominating Carver studies in the upcoming period. While this paper intends to contribute to these discussions, the underlying concern of the argumentation remains the effort to map out some of the characteristics of reduction as a primary tool of representation in literary minimalism.

What makes Carver’s reception history a relevant context for explorations about the working of reduction is the fact that Lish’s textual interventions that constitute a major challenge in the recent reception history were primarily aimed at the reduction of various elements of Carver’s manuscripts. Most importantly, he omitted more than half of the words of the original version of Carver’s breakthrough collection, *WWTA*. In addition to substantial omissions, Lish pared down Carver’s stories on all levels of syntax, word choice, onomastics, and plot “cutting everything down to the marrow, not just to the bone,”¹ as the writer put it retrospectively when asked in an interview about his former style.

Lish also largely contributed to the atmosphere of *menace* often mentioned as a major element in Carver’s stories. By reducing most of the introspection of the characters, such as important flash backs, monologues, references to emotional state, as well as changing the endings of many of the stories Lish actively participated in the creation of a narrative world filled with obscure motivations and unaccounted feelings of threat. The very act of cutting

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some of Carver’s stories in the middle, and adding a few powerful but enigmatic lines of closure to the end, in itself is responsible for much of the effects of menace associated with Carver’s stories, and also offers a clear example of aesthetic effect reached by means of reduction.

Therefore, by considering the textual interventions performed by Carver’s controversial editor, what appears to be the source of an irresolvable tension in the evaluation of the writer’s literary legacy, may also be considered as a unique chance to gain insights into the goals and effects of reduction. The new canonical volume not only allows us to read the fuller versions of some of Carver’s stories but, by means of comparison, to clearly identify Lish’s editorial contributions that are primarily reductive by nature. For this reason, in the argumentation enquiries about the concept of reduction are associated with those about the concept of authority that are in the center of the Carver controversy.

**Research Design & Hypotheses**

In order to describe and contextualize Lish’s reductive textual strategies we look at their effects on the formation of authority at work in the reception of the edited stories and the writer’s entire oeuvre. If we look at the complex publication history of Carver’s stories we may see that the writer’s work shows the traits of numerous interventions that resulted in a proliferation of versions both during and after his lifetime. Carver is known as a writer who published several versions of his stories as a result of his revision of former publications. The appearance of new stories and new versions did not stop with the writer’s death. The posthumous recovering of unpublished and uncollected stories may also be considered as a major influence on the formation of the Carver canon and is included in the discussion to show the particular shift of authority from the writer to his editors after his death. The latest
event in the narrative of different influences forming Carver’s work is the restoration of the manuscript versions of some of his most reviewed stories in the new canonical collection.

All of these types of textual intervention clearly affect the various concepts of authority at work in the Carver canon. The practice of revisioning makes the writer’s image a dynamic construct allowing readers to see his authority in the making. Recovering and restoration are editorial contributions that actively interfere with the writer’s legacy and exercise concepts of authority that are clearly beyond the known intentions of the author. Thereby, these textual interventions, all contributing to the forming of the writer’s work, can be regarded as different paradigms of authority, in the sense that they “exhibit” different “patterns” of authority as the term, paradigm suggests.

It is in this context of multiple paradigms of authority at work in the creation of the Carver canon that we consider Lish’s contributions and their implications in terms of the particular paradigm of authority his editions represent. Since his contributions are primarily reductive in nature, and in order to differentiate them from other forms of editorial work, in the present paper Lish’s versions are referred to as redactions and shown within the network of the four different paradigms of authority. By inserting the textual practices of redaction into the multiple network of influences we may see that Lish’s contribution is only one of the major influences on the writer’s work and hence, the anxiety over his concealed presence in the Carver canon is not necessarily justifiable.

By looking at Carver’s revisions we may see that the different versions produced and published during his life expanded the writer’s authority, enabling it to account for the modifications and influence the reception of the stories. This process created a public image of the writer as an artist continuously polishing his works and at the same time, it allowed for the proliferation of the versions of his stories. Thus, Carvers revisions had opposing effects on the concept of the writer’s authority: they created an expanded image of a conscious and
perfectionist writer and simultaneously, they opened up his works for enquiries about textual production seen more as a process of manufacturing in which the concepts of originality or authenticity may be reconsidered.

By focusing on the process of recovering that took place after the writer’s death, we turn towards what could be seen as the afterlife of the writer’s work. In this process editorial intervention presents itself as a conventional act of continuing the writer’s efforts to publish his works. However, the collecting of formerly uncollected stories and the publication of unpublished stories may also be considered as two major steps in the shift of authority from the writer to the editors. In addition, the posthumous publication of early stories further widen the gap between the genesis of the stories and their reception history, that was already created by the unusual publication history of Carver’s revisions. Therefore, the publication of recovered stories can be seen as the working of another paradigm of authority in which the writer’s practice of collecting and publishing his works is surpassed by an idea of completeness in the writer’s image constructed by his editors.

Processes of restoration provide an even richer material for considering the scope of editorial contribution. By directly overwriting the author’s known intentions regarding his literary legacy in order to restore his artistic intentions supposedly coded in the manuscripts, restoration also results in opposing effects on the functioning of authority. The first is a clear effort of searching for authenticity; an effort capable of producing valuable texts to offer ground for further explorations of the writer’s style and the genesis of the stories. The other effect, however, is the creation of a literary legacy in which the author is put under the custody of his editors who set out to positively rewrite the author’s work in the name of restoring it.

From the perspective offered by these three paradigms of authority above, the editorial work of redaction, that appeared to be the source of anxiety in Carver’s reception, may be
seen in a new light. Considering the processes of revision, recovering and restoration allows us to look at Carver’s oeuvre as a multi-layered network of versions in which the concepts of chronology, originality and authenticity, as well as writerly gestures of authorization stop functioning as absolute markers of his literary legacy. This approach allows us to eliminate major difficulties in the way of considering and evaluating Lish’s contribution. The publication of the manuscripts of *Beginners* along with the stripped-down versions of *WWTA* in the canonical volume of *Collected Stories* not only offers valuable insights into a yet undiscovered segment of Carver Country but, by means of contrast, it also brings Lish’s redactions into the focus. By looking at the strategies of redaction free from the anxiety dominating its reception history, we are also offered an approach to the minimalist strategy of reduction within a possible frame of references its understanding seems to require.

Therefore, the argumentation sets out to present Lish’s redactions within the network of different paradigms of authority at work in the formation of the Carver canon in order to reach two apparently different objectives. The first is an effort to offer an approach to the writer’s work in which the tension in the writer’s reception history created by the Carver controversy is reduced by revealing the multiplicity and the mutual interdependence of the various influences upon his work. The second goal of the argumentation is to present reduction as an autonomous and legitimate textual strategy that is inseparable from Carver’s literary legacy. The two objectives combined point towards a possible “emancipation” of Carver’s early stories, in the forms they were first received by the general public, and create an approach to a heterogeneous concept of authority at work in the act of writing seen as a collective process that may result in a literary canon with equally authentic and legitimate multiple versions. Another possible result of this approach is an understanding of the textual strategy of reduction as a primarily *relative* concept that does not function as an end in itself, only as a possible means to an end.
In order to reach these objectives, the argumentation first explores the relationship between the strategy of reduction and the concept of authority by claiming that issues of authority are indispensable when trying to define the goals and limits of reduction. The second chapter offers a brief overview of the Anglo-American and the Hungarian reception and publication history of Carver’s work with special attention paid to the publication and reception of the different versions of his stories, as well as their Hungarian translations. The Carver controversy that is at the center of the writer’s reception history is introduced together with the scholarly agitation it gave rise to in order to show that the controversy over Lish’s contributions has been fuelled by the various paradigms of authority at work in the formation of the Carver canon. The publication history of the Hungarian translations shows that a seemingly arbitrary context, such as the publication of translations is also influenced by the same paradigms of authority that are detectable in the original canon.

The third chapter is devoted to a discussion of the four major paradigms of authority at work in the formation of the Carver canon. The textual interventions of revision, recovering, restoration, and redaction are presented in their mutual influences, within the context of various conflicting paradigms of authority, and the narratives of Carver’s publication and reception history are interpreted as examples of a complex network of influences contributing to the collective social discourse of literature. These considerations conclude in the presentation of redaction as a dominant paradigm in the Carver canon, a recognition that paradoxically reinforces the central significance of reduction as a textual strategy in his literary legacy.

The final argumentative chapter offers exemplary readings of some of Carver’s stories in order to show the working of different paradigms of authority on the textual level. The interpretations begin with a reading of one of Carver’s signature stories, “So Much Water So Close to Home” that allows us to establish the major characteristics of the differences
between the redacted and the original versions of Carver’s stories. The parallel reading of the two versions shows that they provide ground for significantly different and authentic interpretations and it proves the legitimacy of their inclusion in the canon and illustrates the co-existence of different paradigms of authority in the writer’s work.

The next reading features another signature story published under the titles “The Bath” and “A Small, Good Thing.” This reading focuses on the unusual case of three different authentic versions created by the multiple paradigms of authority: a redaction, a revision, and a restored manuscript version. Since it is the only story with three canonized versions, the reading focuses on the complex mechanisms by which Carver’s revision that he considered as the definitive version, processes Lish’s redaction by both eliminating most of the editor’s changes while authorizing some others, thus creating an authorized version that is at the intersection of various influences.

The third reading revisits the differences between the redactions and the restored manuscripts by looking at a story, “Want to See Something?/“I could See the Smallest Things.” As opposed to “So Much Water So Close to Home,” however, the original version of this story was only made available by the restoration of the manuscript in the Library of America volume. Therefore, this comparison allows us to see the reductive changes Carver authorized by not restoring them in his lifetime. At the same time, the manuscript version and the reading it induces illustrate the working of restoration as a paradigm of authority and presents it as yet another legitimate textual strategy.

The last reading focuses on Carver’s most anthologized story, “Cathedral” that is the only story with one version included in the interpretative chapter. This story represents Carver’s writing after he broke away from his relationship with Lish and it is inserted to show the strategy of reduction applied as an integral part of Carver’s writing style. While the story illustrates the creation of another level of the writer’s authority that finally placed him among
the classics of American literature, it also *thematizes* the process of a person’s regaining his voice and authority. Therefore, the reading of “Cathedral” points towards a synthesis, in terms of presenting Carver’s authentic mode of writing as a result of his artistic development in which Lish played a crucial role, and also by showing how the various strategies of reduction may be applied to create the aesthetic effect of a larger construct of cognition appearing behind the elliptical structures of the narrative.

It is only after the seeming detour of considering the multiple paradigms of authority at work in Carver’s literary legacy and facing the challenges of the Carver controversy, may one venture to evaluate the mature stories of the writer and see their position in his career. The same context of multiple paradigms also allows reduction to be seen as a legitimate strategy of representation and at the same time, a central element in Carver’s writing style.

**RESULTS**

Lish’s controversial efforts to radically alter Carver’s stories by reducing them on various levels, can be seen within the context of a productive but unusual co-operation that offers a unique chance for the reviewer to see the act of writing and that of the reduction of the textual world, otherwise inseparable in minimalist writing, separated by the different paradigms of authority behind them.

At the intersection of internal and external influences the image of the author is under the influence of various paradigms of authority. While his *revisions* first appeared to be motivated by internal influences, such as a clear progress towards richness and depth in his stories, later they appeared as Carver’s efforts to regain authority over his works that is, to reduce the effects of external influences. It implies that Carver’s revisions are centered around and therefore dominated by other paradigms of authority: rather than being an act of re-writing motivated by the writer’s artistic development, Carver’s insistence on publishing
revised versions of his stories is driven by his intention to restore the original versions after their redaction. The *recovering* of some of his early stories was the first paradigm of authority that explicitly showed the signs of external influences because it created the legitimacy of editorial intervention into the writer’s work. The *restoration* of the manuscript version of *WWTA* and the creation of a canon with multiple versions is another editorial intervention with significant consequences to the writer’s image. By *editing out* Lish from Carver, Stull and Carroll actively interfere with the reception of his oeuvre and create a complex image of the writer that provokes our traditional understanding of authorship.

Seen in retrospective light, the *redaction* of Carver’s stories seems to be functioning as a fundamental paradigm of authority that has been implicitly dominating the other paradigms. The writer’s characteristic practice of ceaselessly revising his stories even after their first publication is given a new meaning in the context of a conflict of authority between the writer and his editor. By publishing the revisions of his most redacted stories Carver intended to regain authority over his works while he also authorized and hence, paradoxically appropriated some of Lish’s redactions when including them in his last collection, *Where I’m Calling From*.

In addition to Lish’s redactions, the other significant editorial influence on Carver’s work is related to the contributions of Stull and Carroll. By recovering some of his early stories in *Call If You Need Me* and restoring the manuscript versions of the stories of *WWTA* in *Beginners* Stull and Carroll not only opened up the writer’s work for an active redefining of his oeuvre but created a counterpoint to the controversial influence of Carver’s first editor. While their efforts to recover and restore Carver’s stories are motivated by the intention to create a rich body of authentic texts, the story versions they inserted into the writer’s oeuvre all pertain to the early phase of Carver’s career, the same period in which Lish played a crucial role. In addition, the paradigms of authority functioning in the practices of recovering
and restoration also seem as efforts to gain control over Carver’s early works by explicitly disregarding the writer’s known intentions. In this context the parallel publication of *WWTA* and *Beginners* in the canonical volume of *Collected Stories* shows the symptoms of a conflict of authority between the two opposing editorial influences. This conflict resulted in a literary legacy that the writer clearly could not have authorized, especially considering the fact that Carver always concealed the extent of Lish’s influence on his writing.

By the redaction of many of the central stories in the Carver canon, Lish created unique and equally authentic stories out of Carver’s more expansive manuscripts. While the question whether he enhanced the artistic qualities of Carver’s stories or went too far in paring them down, is likely to remain a major concern in Carver’s future reception, it has been argued that his editorial goals and the particular reductive strategies he applied in his redactions are congruent with the primary directions Carver took in the creation of his authentic style of writing.

This recognition allows us another insight into the working of the strategy of reduction as an effective tool of literary representation. If Lish’s reductionism appears forced and unproductive when seen in itself, it starts to function rather productively when exercised on the texts of an author with a powerful and authentic voice. Reduction, even in its extreme form as applied by Lish, can function as an effective means of representation if there exists a source material that is complex and animated enough to allow for its meaningful application.
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