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# Redefining Intimacy: Carver and Conversation

Frank Bramlett and David Raabe

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Raymond Carver's short story "Intimacy," a poignant exploration of the relationship between an ex-husband and ex-wife, paints for the reader a picture of this ex-couple's rocky history and their current estrangement. The ex-husband narrator, a relatively well-known writer of fiction, arrives unannounced at his ex-wife's home, and she lets him in. While this scene is ordinary enough, Carver's telling of the story is unique. The story itself consists largely of dialogue; there is precious little in the way of action, setting, or exposition. In comparison to most fiction, the proportions of this dialogue are highly skewed: the ex-wife unequivocally dominates the story's conversation, and the ex-husband initially appears to be a victim of her verbal abuse. Accompanying the distorted dialogue, the dearth of concrete objects gives "Intimacy" an empty, vague atmosphere in which readers get few details with which to kindle their imaginations.

Carver crafts "Intimacy" by mapping out the ways in which deep, detailed knowledge of someone leads to enduring intimacy while at the same time it causes that intimacy to be kicked, dissected, strewn about, and gathered up again. To understand how "Intimacy" enacts this (de)/(re)construction, we take an interdisciplinary analytical approach: the relationship and interaction between the ex-husband and the ex-wife is best understood through a confluence of linguistic discourse theory, conversation analysis, and narrative theory.<sup>1</sup> The "conversation" between the narrator and narratee contains the one between the ex-husband and ex-wife; the homodiegetic narrator, in spinning this tale, develops a narratological intimacy with an unnamed **[End Page 178]** narratee at the same time that he conveys the incident with his ex-wife. It is the blend of unprecedented extremes—a merger of minimal and maximal elements in a single narrative—that gives "Intimacy" a pivotal place in Carver's canon.<sup>2</sup> In this essay, we argue that Carver redefines intimacy through disproportionate dialogue, a paucity of concrete objects, and nonverbal communication—uniquely demonstrating the fundamental need for human beings to narrate meaning into their lives.

## Conversation and Interpersonal Relations

In his work on linguistic discourse analysis, James Paul Gee discusses the relationship between current conversations (what is now being said) and past conversations (what was once said) through two concepts.<sup>3</sup> One is intertextuality, that property of texts that links them to previous texts, those that have come before (55). The other idea is one of

Gee's own: he conceptualizes "little-c" conversation to specify the current dialogue/interaction and "big-c" Conversation to specify the history, development, and dynamism of ongoing conversations that have led up to the current one (13, 34-37).<sup>4</sup> The verbal interaction between ex-husband and ex-wife in Carver's story is their "little-c" conversation:

I'm listening, I say. I'm all ears, I say.

She says, I've really had a bellyful of it, buster! Who asked you here today anyway? I sure as hell didn't.

(445)<sup>5</sup>

The way that people make "little-c" conversations is always affected by their previous "little-c" conversations, the sum of which equals the ongoing "big-c" Conversation (this is intertextuality). In the case of strangers meeting for the first time (perhaps at a cocktail party, on a blind date, or just sharing a taxi), the conversation participants often rely on "tried and true" conversation routines that provide ways of opening up individual histories that begin to become a part of their ongoing Conversation ("Can you believe how hot it's been lately?"; "The Mets can't seem to win, can they?"). If the participants in the taxi ride never meet again, then their "little-c" conversation is virtually equivalent to their "big-c" Conversation. If the blind date turns out to be a smashingly successful relationship, then that very first "little-c" conversation serves as the beginning of the ongoing Conversation, as a text to which all subsequent "little-c" conversations may refer.

For analysis of "Intimacy," it is important to understand relations between and among conversations and Conversations; however, it is equally important to understand the building blocks of individual conversations. Since conversation analysis is a method of investigating the structures and orders of everyday talk, it illuminates the way people who engage in conversation manage their lives. Having foundations in sociology, conversation analysis (CA) shows how people follow extant rules, revise them, and create new ones as they go along, establishing and maintaining social relationships through conversational interaction. In commenting on the use of conversation in institutional settings, John Heritage claims that the institutions themselves[**End Page 179**] are "talked into being" (qtd. in Ten Have 8). Going beyond core theory, some studies expand CA to explore such notions as conversation and irony, and conversation and humor. Here, we explore Carver's use of fictional conversation to create and maintain character intimacy in the short story.

The context of the ex-couple's current, story-bound conversation, of course, includes the historical development of their ongoing Conversation: "[W]hen something of mine

appeared, or was written about me in the magazines or papers—a profile or an interview—I sent her these things. . . . [S]he never responded" (444); "She says, I loved you so much once. I loved you to the point of distraction. I did. More than anything in the whole wide world. Imagine that. What a laugh that is now" (446). This is the intertextual nature of their talk. Further, the intimacy that the two negotiate in their current interaction is always founded on the intimacy that they shared in the past. Therefore, it is clear that their current, immediate intimacy—what we will call "little-i" intimacy—develops only as a result of their ongoing, historical "big-i" Intimacy. Carver's use of dialogue shows that the couple's intimacy has changed over time—from an intense and yearning intimacy early in their relationship to an anemic but tenacious intimacy during the present visit.

Through their social interaction and the action sequences of their conversation (e.g., question-answer sequences), the ex-husband and the ex-wife relive intimate moments from the past, engage in and negotiate intimate moments in the present, and in some ways anticipate moments of intimacy in the future. This negotiation evolves through one of the most important concepts in CA: the conversation turn. In describing the system of conversational turn-taking, what they call turn-allocation techniques (716), Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson explain that speakers and hearers operate together to make the conversation work, what they term local and interactional management of talk (724-27). Interestingly, they note Goffman's description of turn-taking itself as a social encounter in which "*intimate* collaboration must be sustained" (697n emphasis ours). In taking turns, interlocutors tend to follow the same set of rules. According to Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, the first option is that the current speaker can select the next speaker; the second option is that the next speaker can self-select; the third option is that if neither of these options is taken, then the current speaker can continue. If none of these options is used, then the conversation comes to an end, if only briefly (716-20). While turns may vary in form, length, and number, all conversations have some degree of turn-taking.

An initial reading of "Intimacy" suggests a distortion of the everyday turn-taking system; the ex-wife engages in an extended near-monologue in which the ex-husband hardly figures. However, linguistic discourse theory refocuses this interpretation. In the story, they sit in the ex-wife's living room and engage in conversation, yet this is only one episode in their history, their extensive relationship, their ongoing Conversation. It is this "big-c" Conversation—stretching over many years and many arguments, and including children and divorce—that contains the couple's Intimacy, what the ex-wife refers to in the current story, the current "little-c" conversation. While it is true that the ex-wife dominates the story-bound conversation, the context of the story actually reveals her talk to be a response to the ex-husband's own extended turn. Over the past four years, the ex-husband has held **[End Page 180]** the

Conversational floor by sending magazine and newspaper clippings to his ex-wife (444).<sup>6</sup> To her, he has been writing and talking about their marriage. During this period, she has remained silent, has not taken a turn in the Conversation. From the ex-wife's perspective, the narrator has betrayed their Intimacy by using it to make his living: he has "made her feel exposed and humiliated," and she says, "But then you were into betrayal early" (444). Moreover, by sending her the clippings, he seems to her to have been flaunting that betrayal.

In turn-taking practice, it is the right of the current speaker to select the next speaker; when the ex-husband shows up at his ex-wife's house unannounced, he is in effect selecting her to take her turn, and she obliges. What the sequence of turns does not show, however, is the tenor of the conversation. The content of the turns shows that the ex-wife is expressing highly negative emotive states through her language, and this is especially true during the beginning and middle of the story. Her assault is direct: "She says, You know something? I think you're sick" (445); "You think you're God or somebody? You're not fit to lick God's boots, or anybody else's for that matter"; "You give in too easy. You always did. You don't have any principles, not one" (446); "I think if you were on fire right now, if you suddenly burst into flame this minute, I wouldn't throw a bucket of water on you" (448). However, near the end of the story, the ex-wife's tone changes dramatically; at that point she expresses understanding, forgiveness, and even sympathy for someone who she believes wronged her deeply. What happens to precipitate this change is the ex-husband's turn—an extended, nonlinguistic one—which serves as the turning point of the story, of the current conversation, and of their relationship, their ongoing Conversation, discussed below.

Carver uses dialogue in "Intimacy" in unexpected ways. The talk that takes place in the present time of the story, the "little-c" conversation, is staggeringly disproportionate. Further, not only does the ex-husband/narrator take few turns, some of them are nonlinguistic—moments of silence accompanied by a physical gesture that stands in for his linguistic turns. It is important not to take this conversational exchange as some kind of dysfunction in the ongoing relationship of the ex-couple; instead, the conversation evokes past intimacies that they shared, builds the intimacy of the moment, and prepares the reader for the most intimate moment of the story.

### **Building and Sustaining Intimacy through "Little-C" Conversations**

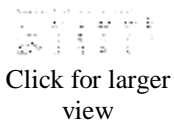
The four years of one-sided conversation (with the ex-husband dominating), which includes his betrayal of their Intimacy, serve as the immediately preceding context of the current, story-bound conversation (with the ex-wife dominating). These "little-c" conversations create, sustain, and modify the couple's Intimacy. Further, the Intimacy the couple has shared previously (as well as their ongoing Conversation) creates the

base on which the current conversation and current "little-i" intimacy are made. As a character, the homodiegetic narrator never assesses his own prior behavior as a source of the ex-wife's pain. Instead, he lets her have her say. The **[End Page 181]** confrontational tone of blame she immediately assumes is something he has heard before—he feels right at home with it (444). It is an established trait of their "big-i" Intimacy. Whatever positive closeness and understanding might have characterized the Intimacy in their early marriage no longer exists. But her continued awareness of it has fused with awareness of its rupture to create the "big-i" Intimacy that both know is in place when she begins her harangue. At the same time, the "little-c" conversation and the "little-i" intimacy enrich the historical Conversation and Intimacy the couple will use (or be able to use) in all their future interactions. They establish that, for better or worse, they will always share an Intimacy.

Gee argues that neither the social situation nor the language used in the situation comes first, that neither one is necessarily more important than the other (80, 82). He calls this equivalent relationship "reflexivity," which can be defined as a reciprocal production and reproduction of the socially situated language (what Gee calls "big-d" Discourse). The language used in a particular time and place both creates/reflects the social situation and is constrained/determined by the social situation. What this reflexivity means for "Intimacy" is that the situation (the ex-husband and ex-wife, sitting in her living room, talking about their history/relationship) helps determine the language used (the "little-c" conversation, the ex-wife predominating). At the same time, the story's language (almost all hers) creates, constrains, and reflects the parameters of the social situation: "She says, I loved you so much once. I loved you to the point of distraction. . . . What a laugh that is now. Can you imagine it? We were so *intimate* once upon a time I can't believe it now. I think that's the strangest thing of all now. The memory of being that intimate with somebody. We were so intimate I could puke. I can't imagine ever being that intimate with somebody else. I haven't been" (446 emphasis original). They are still "intimate" or she couldn't say so. She later says "I can't imagine how I'd explain this if my husband was to walk in" (452). In essence, both the ex-wife and the ex-husband always already have in their minds the "assumed intimacy" of their relationship. Her current husband, Fred, apparently does not share, nor could he readily understand, their complicated familiarity. In this story, both the ex-husband and the ex-wife still assume enough intimacy to engage in conversation about these intimate details (although they may and probably do assume different intensities of intimacy). Both characters maintain a high level of awareness about the rupture in their Intimacy/intimacy and rely on their assumed Intimacy to negotiate this very breach.

## **Disproportionate Dialogue and Things**

"Intimacy" is unique among Carver's short fiction for two reasons. First, its percentage of dialogue far exceeds that of other stories; second, the relative amount of dialogue produced by husband and wife is drastically skewed. Table 1 compares four Carver stories in which almost all the dialogue consists of wife-husband conversation. The wives speak more in each, but in the two stories that are nonargumentative, each spouse's amount of speech is close to the same. In Carver's earlier argumentative story "A Serious Talk," the wife speaks twice as much. But in "Intimacy," which [End Page 182] is almost three-fourths dialogue, the wife dominates the conversation by seven times that of the other story. She has more than ample opportunity to display her most intimate emotions.<sup>7</sup>



**Table 1**

Dialogue percentage and wife-husband conversation share in four Raymond Carver stories.

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In the present-time conversation of his story, the ex-husband does manage to reply to his ex-wife's harangue, but just enough to remind the reader that Carver is presenting a dramatically credible dialogue, however disproportionate it is. In fact, many of the ex-husband's brief responses might not even qualify as full conversational turns. Very often participants in everyday conversation express their opinions and emotions through backchannel cues (Renkema 111-12). These words or short phrases, sometimes only vocalizations like "mm-hmm" or "uh-huh," indicate a range of meanings (e.g., the hearer could indicate agreement with the speaker and/or express active listening). Taking a breath after about three hundred words, the ex-wife in "Intimacy" checks to see if her ex-husband is listening to her, and the ex-husband's response serves to indicate his participation in the dialogue: "I'm listening, I say. I'm all ears, I say" (445). Accepting his response, his backchannel cue, as proof of his attention, she goes at him again for another four hundred rancorous words. Her verbal assault is a counterpart to the purely physical beating administered by the wife in another Carver work, his poem "Miracle," published in 1987. She and her husband are flying home from their second bankruptcy hearing:

without a word, she turns  
in her seat and drills him. Punches him and  
punches him, and he takes it.  
Knowing deep down he deserves it ten times over—  
whatever she wants to dish out—he is being

deservedly beaten for something, there are good reasons. All the while his head is pummeled, buffeted back and forth, her fists falling against his ear, his lips, his jaw. . . .

*(All of Us 243)*

The text of "Intimacy" contains the words "she says" sixty-six times, introducing the salvos of the ex-wife's vitriolic barrage, which is interspersed with the ex-husband's [End Page 183]laconic backchannel cues ("I say . . .") only fourteen times prior to his climactic gesture.

The ex-husband's few clear turns mainly occur as a result of the "normal" expectations of preferred structures in adjacency pairs, such as question-answer:

She says, Are you listening to me?  
I'm listening, I say. I'm all ears, I say.

(445)

In short, when the ex-husband speaks, he does so when virtually forced to answer the questions that the ex-wife asks of him:

You know what I'm talking about, don't you? Am I right?  
Right, I say. Right as rain.

(446)

Am I getting warm? Am I right?  
Tell me about the knife, I say.

(447)

This last example follows the spirit of cooperation that is expected in question-answer adjacency pairs, though it could be argued not to follow the proverbial letter of the law. The ex-wife asks a "yes/no" question, but the ex-husband does not give the most socially preferred answer (that is, either "yes" or "no"). Instead, he answers in an indirect way, by eliciting her story about the knife: in effect, doing so not by asking a direct question (such as "Would you give me material for a new story?") but by using a sentence with an imperative mood verb: "Tell me about the knife."

The reaction of the reader (implied or actual) to the "Intimacy" wife's painful invective is necessarily more pronounced than that of the ex-husband since it is intensified by initial repugnance at his apparent indifference, as in the poem. Perhaps



his passivity is initially motivated by understanding his ex-wife's strong feeling of betrayal; in any case, analysis shows the verbal imbalance is his idea at least as much as hers. The ex-husband takes part in the collaboration needed for conversation just enough to keep it going. Moreover, in a sense, only on the surface is he what Goffman calls a "ratified coparticipant"; really he is serving his hidden agenda, which is to mine the conversation for writing material, verifying her view of him as a traitor to their Intimacy. He is engaging in a kind of one-person "collusive communication," which Goffman says must be seen as "a *departure* from the [conversational] norm, else its structure and significance will be lost" (qtd. in Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 697n emphasis ours).

The ex-wife gives the ex-husband many chances to answer or refute what she says—at least as often as she changes her train of thought. These moments during a speaker's turn when another speaker might take the conversational floor are called transition-relevance places (TRPs) (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 703). At times she ends her utterances with questions that are more than just rhetorical: "But why keep it going? Don't you ever get tired of dredging up that old business?"<sup>8</sup>; "What the hell do you want from me? Blood?" (445). Thus, she repeatedly offers CA option [End Page 184] one, current speaker selects next speaker, sometimes so pointedly that his failure to take a turn would border on the uncooperative were they on less intimate terms.

She says . . . I think I know why you turned up, but I want to hear it from you.

When I don't answer, when I just keep sitting there, she goes on.

(448)

Option three provides that if no second speaker selects a turn, the current speaker continues. It is mostly his call, not hers.

While it is of course impossible to claim that intimacy/Intimacy always occurs as a result of disproportionate dialogue and question-answer adjacency pairs, it *is* the case that the ex-couple in "Intimacy" create their current, story-bound intimacy in these ways, as informed by both their ongoing Conversation and their ongoing Intimacy. It is through their history together that they manage, create, and re-create the "Rules" of their Conversation and their Intimacy, and through their conversational practices they "talk" their newly-defined Intimacy into being.

Scanning her word-stream like a data disk, the ex-husband perks up only when she mentions the knife she once pulled on him: "Go ahead," he says, "why don't you, and tell me about it." She immediately understands something: "I think I know why you're here even if you don't. But you're a slyboots. You know why you're here. You're on a

fishing expedition. You're hunting for *material*" (447). What she says is truer than she realizes. Carver's narrator, established textually as an accomplished writer, is looking for conflict that will propel a future story (possible further "betrayal"). But more than events for fiction fodder, he seeks something beyond the power of language to convey emotion, the very core of the pain and anguish she feels but expresses only in vague terms. Carver knew William Carlos Williams's oft-stated and oft-cited dictum: "No ideas but in things." The narrator/ex-husband needs something tangible—material—hence his interest in the knife. The knife instantly evokes her deepest anger and despair at the most intimate level of their knowledge of one another.

The number of recent literary studies that have explored the importance of concrete things (metonymies) in works of realistic fiction, mainly as they associate with and elucidate character, speaks to the perspicacity of Jakobson's observations in "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances." Carver's friend author Richard Ford recalls, "When he wrote ['Intimacy'] . . . , Ray was a very astute craftsman of his stories and authored every effect. . . . [H]e was scrupulous and thoughtful and careful. . . . I believe he could only know every ramifying effect of his stories" (qtd. in Halpert 160).

Carver did know the power and necessity of furnishing a story with associative objects. Nevertheless, "Intimacy" is almost perfectly *demeuble*. "I put the furnishings and the physical things surrounding the people into the stories as I need those things," Carver wrote in 1981 ("Fires" 96). Not one physical detail of the interior of the ex-wife's house, where the story's single scene takes place, is described at all. She lets the narrator/ex-husband into her living room in the third paragraph, and he walks out of the still open door in the next-to-last.

Only two objects frame the wife's rhetorical display. Before they talk, she **[End Page 185]** brings him "some coffee"; after the emotional climax, she gives him his hat. Within that frame are only two other concrete things: the knife, not in the story's present time but which they mentally recall, and her clothing, which by its solo presence as well as its placement, is central to the story's structural climax. This imagistic paucity contrasts, for example, with an intimate moment in another late Carver story, the more fully furnished "Blackbird Pie": "On the evening in question, we ate dinner rather silently but not unpleasantly, as was our custom. From time to time I looked up and smiled across the table as a way of showing my gratitude for the delicious meal—poached salmon, fresh asparagus, rice pilaf with almonds. The radio played softly in the other room; it was a little suite by Poulenc that I'd first heard on a digital recording five years before in an apartment on Van Ness, in San Francisco, during a thunderstorm" (494). "Intimacy" cuts to the issue. For the ex-husband and the reader, there is in effect no seeing, only hearing. The ex-wife's anger and bitterness, anguish and humiliation bubble immediately to the surface despite the fact that it has

been four years since their last meeting. She begins the logorrheic diatribe of her Conversational turn, devoid of anything concrete but full of abstractions—no specifics, no causes, no details.

The final group of responses by the ex-husband culminates in a cluster of three quick reiterations that end his part of the dialogue and bring the narrative to the turning point. The ex-wife questions his motives by suggesting he belongs somewhere else: "Shouldn't you be somewhere far from here at this very minute? No, *I say*. *I say* it again: No. No place, *I say*. I don't have anyplace I have to be. And then *I do something*" (450 emphasis ours). The thing he does is touch her clothing. For the climactic scene, they begin a new mode of communication that continues the conversation and, at the same time, moves beyond words.

### **The Interplay of Words, Silence, and Gesture**

A variety of devices can delineate conversational turn-taking points. In the case of the ex-husband, several TRP indicators occur. The end of his turn ("I don't have anyplace I have to be") is a grammatically complete utterance, indicating his willingness for the ex-wife to take a turn. For him, the talk is over; more words will not, perhaps cannot, do. (There is one final occurrence of "I say" later in the text: "I say good-bye" [453].) Language aside, the ex-husband's silence, combined with his physical gesture of touching the ex-wife's clothing, clearly signals a TRP. In fact, we argue that the touching functions as a "current speaker selects next speaker" turn change option: "I reach over and take the sleeve of her blouse between my thumb and forefinger. That's all. I just touch it that way, and then I just bring my hand back. She doesn't draw away. She doesn't move" (450).

Raymond Person describes body movement in literature as part of dialogue: "a character produces a meaningful body movement—whether facial expression, posture, or other gestures—that is . . . explicated verbally by the narrator as if the characters spoke what they meant" (78).<sup>9</sup> But Carver's narrator does not explain his gesture, either when he makes it or when he relates the story to the narratee: "Then here's the **[End Page 186]** thing I do next. I get down on my knees, a big guy like me, and I take the hem of her dress. What am I doing on the floor? I wish I could say. But I know it's where I ought to be, and I'm there on my knees holding on to the hem of her dress" (450). Later, while the ex-husband still grasps her hem, the ex-wife—not the narrator—gives us a glimpse into the ex-husband's unusual behavior: "She says, Get up now. What is it? You still want something from me. What do you want? Want me to forgive you? Is that why you're doing this? . . . That's the reason you came all this way" (451).

Person argues that "readers interpret the body movement of their co-participants, often unconsciously. . . . [Through the narrative,] the readers are better prepared to imagine visually what the body movement was and are told what it meant" (78-79). In "Intimacy," Carver does not substantiate a gesture with narrator comment, character dialogue, or even imagined dialogue; instead, he has the ex-wife "guess" at the meaning of the gesture, based on her intimate knowledge of the ex-husband. It is appropriate that she do this; as Fludernik points out, "Most linguists would currently agree that meaning is produced by the listener, who from the available information input computes the most likely meaning that conforms to the generic and situational conventions of the ongoing linguistic exchange and to its topical, contextual relevancy" (60). Although CA does not often concern itself with nonlinguistic turns, we adapt CA to explain that the ex-husband's extended grasp on the ex-wife's dress hem serves as a nonlinguistic "speaker selects next" turn indicator. CA sometimes addresses the notion of silence, in and of itself a meaningful turn-taking practice, but the ex-husband's silence does not stand alone as a turn; it coordinates with gesture to achieve the ex-husband's communicative effect.

The hem of the dress is this story's central object—nontrite, nonobvious, and, unlike the knife, temporally present at the main action level. Broadly invoking Herman's narratological application of functional grammar's "process types" (136-48) provides fuller understanding of how this climactic part of the story brings the disproportionate dialogue strategy to an extreme. The ex-husband abandons speech altogether in favor of gesture (i.e., the sum of his nonlinguistic turns), which coalesces with the ex-wife's conversational turns to reveal the important changes in her feelings. The changes arise from an interplay of three (out of six possible) process types: verbal, material, and mental, both at a grammatical (clause) level and as aspects of the narrative.

Up to this point, almost all of the narrative has been comprised of *verbal* processes ("I say; she says"). Now it moves to a *material* process as the ex-husband ("actor") grasps the dress hem ("goal"). The act is classifiable as the "dispositive" (doing to) subtype of the material process; but in sustaining it, the ex-husband catalyzes at least three different reactions in the ex-wife which demonstrate the "creative" (bringing about) subtype. As stated earlier, the ex-husband's silence, combined with his grasp on her hem, serves as a conversational turn. In fact, he takes three successive nonlinguistic turns which each signal a "current speaker selects next speaker" turn change: the ex-husband's turn has ended and the ex-wife should begin another turn. The gesture stands as a signal for both the conversation they are engaged in currently as well as the ongoing Conversation they have been having for years. The ex-husband's silent, humble posture ("phenomenon") evokes in the ex-wife **[End Page 187]** ("senser") a *mental* process of the "cognitive" subtype in which she recognizes and verbalizes the satisfaction of her "need to ventilate." Her vitriol is gone: "Listen, it's okay. I'm over it

now." She produces one last abstraction of her old feeling and stresses it as a cap to her philippic: "For the longest while, honey, I was inconsolable. *Inconsolable*, she says. Put that word in your little notebook. I can tell you from experience that's the saddest word in the English language" (450-51 emphasis original). She is done; she has reconciled herself to his betrayals, "the whole cruddy business" (450), and wants him to leave.

However, the ex-husband does not relent; he encourages her to continue her turn by sustaining his nonverbal gesture as well as refusing again to take a linguistic turn in the conversation (thereby reinforcing the disproportion): "It's crazy, but I'm still on my knees holding the hem of her dress. I won't let it go. I'm like a terrier, and it's like I'm stuck to the floor. It's like I can't move" (451). This time the ex-wife senses what she thinks is a different phenomenon, believing he kneels in supplication, in need of absolution. She verbalizes the outcome of this second cognitive process: "Want me to forgive you? Is that why you're doing this? . . . Okay. . . . I forgive you." His position doesn't change. This passage is as close as we get to being told how to interpret the nonlinguistic turn that the ex-husband has taken in the story-bound conversation. It is improbable that the ex-husband would have made this gesture had he not felt a meaningful intimacy with his ex-wife (regardless of their marital status). What he seems to be asking is something even the church could not grant to a penitent: a sinning license, the freedom to recommit the same transgressions.<sup>10</sup> "But I'm still there, knees to the floor" (451). This third nonlinguistic turn starts a mental process that is essentially of the "affective" subtype, evoking fear that her new husband might come home at this awkward moment. She and "decent" Fred are not that intimate; he wouldn't get it. "Come *on* now, you have to get out of here" (451), and she helps him up.

The ex-wife's final concession is evidence of a fourth, and most compassionate, instance of her mental processes, also evoked by the sight of the supplicant ex-husband, now impressed upon her as a mental image. The narrator zooms in and focuses the reader/narratee (as well as himself): "She says, Listen to me now. Look at me. Listen carefully to what I'm going to tell you. She moves closer. She's about three inches from my face. We haven't been this close in a long time. I take these little breaths that she can't hear, and I wait. I think my heart slows way down, I think"; then she bestows her "gift." It is more than forgiveness. "She says, You just tell it like you have to, I guess, and forget the rest. Like always. You been doing that for so long now anyway it shouldn't be hard for you. She says, There, I've done it. You're free aren't you? At least you think you are anyway. Free at last. That's a joke, but don't laugh. Anyway, you feel better, don't you?" (452).

Reciprocally, his gesture of kneeling and hem-holding becomes an exchange for these things, a return gift for her, intimate beyond words. Her recollection of him is now a

metonymy of its own sort, something which she will remember and can associate with his positive side. It is not just what triggered her forgiveness; it is also a release from her bitterness. It softens her. She has shown that this bitterness, pent up, feeds on itself to become a permanent source of pain. **[End Page 188]**

The progression from anger to benign disinterest is a triumph of dialogic minimalization. What is said on the part of this "recalcitrant narrator" (Herzinger 7) is large compared to his surface utterances. There could be gratitude for her not using the knife, which began the emotional process that culminates at the garment hem. And he may also be apologizing for the slap she has reminded him that he gave her when he took the knife away. But the persistence of his kneeling and hem-holding indicates more significance than that and more than the first three of her mental processes outlined above. What encourages the softening of the ex-wife's demeanor is that she has finally gotten to take her turn. His four-year "domination" of the Conversational floor has bottled up and intensified the betrayal she felt before and after the bad marriage and subsequent divorce. Since one of the primary tenets of verbal exchange is that conversations are cooperative, in remaining silent, in remaining on his knees, in prolonging his grasp on her hem, the ex-husband pushes her to continue her turn in the current conversation as well as the ongoing Conversation. It is this last push from the ex-husband that allows the ex-wife to release her anger and bitterness and to forgive him. Later, recollecting his gesture, she should recall her own capacity to forgive and, beyond that, his deep awareness of this divine quality in her. This is, in fact, what the narrator does; he recollects the forgiveness that the ex-wife grants as he (re)tells this intimate story. Ironically, her change of tone also brings about a possibly pleasant, nonconfrontational end of the conversation: "She says, Maybe you'll be back sometime, and maybe you won't. This'll wear off, you know. Pretty soon you'll start feeling bad again. Maybe it'll make a good story, she says. *But I don't want to know about it if it does*" (452-53 emphasis ours). In conversation analysis, this last clause could be construed as a bid to "shut down the conversation." The ex-wife indicates that she does not wish her ex-husband to take another turn in their ongoing Conversation; she wants their Conversation about the ex-husband's writing to end, putting their I/intimacy into suspended animation.

### **Intimacy in the Telling of the Story**

Emily Dickinson's admonition to tell the truth "slant" since it "must dazzle gradually" is apt in the case of "Intimacy." If the verbally violent core narrative were presented directly to readers, beginning with the ex-wife's abrupt scolding, the narrator would come across as a self-indulgent, inappropriately precipitant airer of dirty laundry. The reaction might be, "This guy has no shame." The monologic nature of the narrative makes the narrator even more dominant in his function than the ex-wife was in what he related. But Carver mitigates these potential problems with a framework that

delicately interposes a narratee and uses varied discourse types to distance the reader a bit from the shock of the nasty domestic conflict.

Judging from the story's opening, there is some distance between narrator and narratee which will have to be bridged if such a personal story is to be frankly told. For example, the two do not share certain knowledge one would expect close friends to have. The narrator says, "I stop off in this little town where my former wife lives" (444). Apparently, the narratee does not know the ex-wife's name, or their acquaintanceship [End Page 189] is not familiar enough for the narrator to use it in referring to her. Nor does it seem appropriate for the narrator to specify the town. Had he said *the* rather than "*this* little town," the narratee may or may not know which town, but use of *this* is logical only if the narratee does not.

As a homodiegetic narrator, the ex-husband is about to reveal to the narratee information about his own former marital relationship that to a casual acquaintance or a stranger could well be too personal and embarrassing, including evidence that he is given to irrational acts and the ex-wife's repeated insistence that he has been a faithless and hurtful lout. Therefore, a degree of intimacy must be established in the telling, also, of this intimate story. Coupland and Jaworski make the claim that transgressive talk may be *constitutive* of intimacy; in doing transgressive narratives (i.e., in discussing topics that are considered rude or risqué), interlocutors establish a mutual social-psychological harmony while accruing benefits from interpersonal interaction (88-89). The ex-husband and ex-wife do this to some degree.<sup>11</sup>

By using transgressive topics, the narrator "talks into being" the narrator-narratee intimacy that allows the story to proceed apace. Their situation must be such a one that would cause any barrier to this intimacy of the narrating to fall away quickly, such as what might prevail in a session with a professional psychological counselor or, given the narrator's line of work, an exchange of plot possibilities in conference with a fellow author.<sup>12</sup>

Employing, in free direct discourse, some elements of what conversation analysts call "recipient design," Carver's narrator starts to build the intimacy with the narratee by anticipating the latter's cognitive processes—assumptions, expectations, or possible questions. "I haven't called and *it's true* I don't know what I am going to find," he says; "*We don't shake hands, much less kiss each other*"; and "*Make no mistake, I feel I'm home*" (444 emphasis ours). Subtly serving a phatic function, this direct discourse brings narrator and narratee closer. Because overall the story, the primary narrative, is not dialogue (in effect, it is one turn in an unheard but presumably coherent conversation), no linguistic backchannel cues can be given by the narratee. The recipient-design elements cited above serve to give the narratee a character presence,

strengthening his relationship with the narrator and providing a buffer for readers from the domestic war story about to be unleashed.

The narrator transitions into tagged direct discourse, which is the type used for nearly all of the story except for two instances of tagged indirect: "She says I've caused her anguish, made her feel exposed and humiliated" (444), and "She says she wishes I'd forget about the hard times, the bad times, when I talk about back then. . . . She wishes I'd get off that other subject. She's bored with it. Sick of hearing about it" (445). From that point to almost the end, there is no more indirect discourse; the narrator purports to be presenting exact words, and they are almost all hers.

The last paragraph is seemingly irrelevant action and description as the narrator recounts walking through the profusion of leaves: "Some kids are tossing a football at the end of the street. But they aren't my kids, and they aren't her kids either. There are these leaves everywhere, even in the gutters. Piles of leaves wherever I look. They're falling off the limbs as I walk. I can't take a step without putting my shoe into leaves." But the two final sentences of the story are a return to free direct discourse, and the **[End Page 190]** narratee must again be considered: "Somebody ought to make an effort here. Somebody ought to get a rake and take care of this" (453). These sentences are examples of indirect speech acts, imperatives that are expressed obliquely but are nonetheless directives. The shift to free direct discourse stresses the narrator's turning his attention away from the phase of gathering material to the phase of considering presentation of the material. One must consider the leaves symbolically—disordered phenomena in the chaos of the natural world that the narrator feels must be addressed with an artistic effort that makes them comprehensible (raking = writing). At one level, he may be trying to help justify his turning the meeting with the ex-wife into a story even though she has given him permission to "tell it like you have to." But he cannot tell everyone's story, so awareness of the need for the leaves to be raked legitimizes the depth of his belief in the importance and necessity of narrative art.

## **Conclusion**

In some ways, it is very important that what the ex-wife and ex-husband discuss be clear enough for the narratee/audience to understand. For example, the knife event is almost explicitly described, while other scenarios are vague or obtuse. However, when a couple like the one in the story is very intimate—or was previously—then a lot of what is communicated is unsaid. The severe conversational imbalance itself appropriately conveys the ex-wife's extreme hurt and anger. But tacit communication between intimates (friends, lovers, spouses, ex-spouses) is a mainstay of any relationship; it is not exceptional. It is quite reasonable, then, for Carver to construct a narrative in which details are sparse, facts are vague, and events are cloudy. Because



the two characters share such a vast, complex history, their texts seem, to the reader at least, to brim with "diffused, faint clues and indirections" (Whitman 561). This beautifully illustrates the depth and intensity of their big-I Intimacy. Though strained to the apparent breaking point by emotions that press the limits of what words can express, and then go beyond those limits—such bonds of human intimacy, once established, sustain and endure. It is a story well worth telling.

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## Endnotes

We wish to acknowledge James Phelan's valuable editorial and interpretive suggestions.

1. In much of this paper, the term *discourse* matches the definitions used in linguistic fields of study, described later in the analysis. However, in discussing types of utterance representation, we follow the narratological sense relating to the machinery of the telling of the story.

2. Carver knew and admired John Barth's essay on minimalism and in "Intimacy" exemplifies its ecumenical conclusion: "For if there is much to admire in artistic austerity, its opposite is not without merits and joys as well. . . . There truly are more ways than one to heaven. As between minimalism and its opposite, I pity the reader—or the writer, or the age—too addicted to either to savor the other" (Barth 25). Carver escaped from the "minimalist" pigeonhole in his lifetime. Adam Meyer puts the issue in perspective in *Raymond Carver* and quotes Carver: "Who isn't tired to death by now of that stale [End Page 191] debate?" (30-31). "Intimacy" especially is more than analysts have estimated it to be: not just another domestic drama but a benchmark in Carver's fictional experimentation and artistic development. For example, Facknitz sees in "Intimacy" a failure to elude "the menace of an old fatuity" in which Carver

seems to regress, "indulging himself in . . . torpid kookiness" (67-68). But Runyon, although sensing rather than analyzing, observes that "the insistent, mechanical repetition of. . . she sayses is something new in Carver's fiction" (188).

3. Gee theorizes that "little-d" discourses consist of texts and textual properties, word choice, grammatical cohesion, lexical collocation, etc. On the other hand, "big-d" Discourses are language plus other "stuff," including "situated identities; ways of performing and recognizing characteristic identities and activities; ways of coordinating and getting coordinated by other people, things, tools, technologies, symbol systems, places, and times; characteristic ways of acting-interacting-feeling-emoting-valuing-gesturing-posturing-dressing-thinking-believing-knowing-speaking-listening" (38). For this analysis of Carver's short story, it is important to combine narrow, specific analysis of the conversation between the ex-husband and ex-wife with an expansive reliance on linguistic discourse theory to enrich that analysis.

4. According to Gee, "big-c" Conversations should be "viewed as (historic) conversations between and among 'big-d' Discourses, not just among individual people" (34). Gee cites examples like "the long-running, historic Conversation between biology and creationism, or between the Los Angeles police department and Latino street gangs" (34). The claim that Conversations involve more than just people we take to be accurate, hence our belief that the ex-husband (and his history), the ex-wife (and her history), and the relationship between the two (this would be a kind of institution) are prime candidates for explications *via* the notion of "big-c" Conversation and "little-c" conversation.

5. All page number citations for Carver's stories refer to *Where I'm Calling From*.

6. In "Frame Analysis of Talk," Goffman says that "between close, long-standing workmates or housemates, . . . there is the important obligation (and right) to update our associates about any change in our life circumstances—the 'closer' the relationship, the more quickly the information is to be imparted and the less dramatic this information need be. In consequence, one's intimate others will always be properly oriented to receive reports and make inquiries" (184). He says routine reporting is a tricky matter but "not an incidental aspect of what a relationship is. . . . The close study of such reportings takes us right into the banal interiors of intimacy (that domain of which psychotherapists are the absentee landlords), which might account for the studied neglect of the topic by students of talk" (186-87). We see the ex-husband's practice of sending clippings about himself to the ex-wife as a continuation of the process of reporting. He has been keeping "big-I" Intimacy going, perhaps in an attempt to convince the ex-wife that his work was important, a higher cause for which the sacrifices of their domestic tranquility were appropriate.

7. Almost all the dialogue in "Intimacy" is easily identified as to speaker according to the conventions associated with fiction, despite the absence of quotation marks in the story. For example, all the words of the following passage, except for "I say," count as narrator contribution to the conversation: "Vaguely, I say. I must have deserved it, but I don't remember much about it. Go ahead, why don't you, and tell me about it" (446). By contrast, only the first four words of the following are uttered aloud: "I remember a lot, I say. I say that, then wish I hadn't" (446). One passage does not absolutely distinguish between the spoken word and the thoughts of the narrator: "Regret, I say. It doesn't interest me much, to tell the truth. Regret is not a word I use very often. I guess I mainly don't have it. I admit I hold to the dark view of things. Sometimes, anyway. But regret? I don't think so" (447-48). Clearly, the first word is uttered aloud by the narrator, but the rest could be either speech directed to the ex-wife or anomalous discourse directed toward the narratee. We include it in his word count partly on the evidence of her reply: "You're a real son of a bitch, did you know that?," which seems an unlikely response if the narrator's conversational turn consists of only the noncommittal, single word "Regret." Including these forty-three words—his longest utterance—the computer calculates his total at 138 compared to 2,187 for the ex-wife, a sixteen-to-one ratio (without them, the ratio would be more than twenty-three-to-one). **[End Page 192]**

8. Actually, he is tacitly requesting that *she* do the "dredging," in Goffman's sense of the term, bringing to mind information she might not volunteer. She is not obliged by conversational custom to provide it, but if he has established an appropriate "state of talk," she should not take umbrage at the suggestion (181-82). Her willingness to discuss the knife shows that the dredging is okay with her and works for him.

9. One of Person's examples, from Flannery O'Connor's "Greenleaf," shows such narratorial speculation about a farmhand's possible reaction to a bull's having gotten loose on the place: "[H]is expression, his whole figure, his every pause, would say: 'Hit looks to me like one or both of them boys would not make their maw ride out in the middle of the night thisaway. If hit was my boys, they would have got thet bull up theirsself'" (O'Connor qtd. in Person 77).

10. Campbell compares the narrator to "the diseased men of Gennesaret seeking wholeness by touching the hem of Christ's garment" (73) and "Jacob refusing to release the angel until he is blessed" (74). We would add another Old Testament precedent, Israel's first king, Saul, who, having disobeyed God's orders, seeks pardon by catching hold of Samuel's robe, holding on so tightly that it rips (1 Sam. 15:27). Also, three of the Gospels mention the woman who has suffered from hemorrhages for twelve years and observes, correctly, that if she touches Jesus' cloak she will be well (Matt. 9:21, Mark 5:28, Luke 8:44).

11. Coupland and Jaworski argue that interlocutors who develop narratives do so as "a prime means of evaluating experience, achieving consensus, and doing recreation" (87). Their study of everyday, casual conversations among young friends "shows how speakers . . . negotiate their own local orientations to the status of topics—as transgressive but talkable—and how participants build rapport through their shared alignment to and enjoyment of transgression." The transgressive topics that the research subjects narrate include "the defiling of food, vomiting, and watching animals having sex" (85). In contrast, the characters in "Intimacy" do not cross into such transgressive topics, though the ex-wife's language comes close; instead, they stay within the boundaries of domestic troubles. If Conversation Analysis refines to the point where talk characteristics might indicate or identify types of conversations, an Intimate Conversation would be somewhat simpler than a more casual or more formal one. For instance, it might begin without the usual introductory formalistics. Goffman has observed that intimates share a "domain of matters that can be addressed flat out without summons, altering, or ground laying—in effect, matters taken to be already in consciousness and in addition permissibly addressable" (184). The relationship need not be marital but the conversants would have some social connection—share a common profession, religion, or other interest having such a domain of matters. We suspect that the disproportionate talk displayed in "Intimacy" is not generally characteristic of intimate conversation, but CA theorists might continue looking at gesture—how it is interpreted and the nature of its role in conversation.

12. This speculation does not discount the possibility that, presupposing the chemical intimacy of a cocktail or three, such a highly personal tale might well be told in a public place, to a perfect stranger. In Margaret Atwood's "Rape Fantasies," for example, the presence in the story of a narratee is made known only near the end when the effusive but apprehensive narrator refers to the setting being a bar or cafe: "Like here for instance, the waiters all know me and if anyone, you know, bothers me . . . I don't know why I'm telling you all this, except I think it helps you get to know a person, especially at first, hearing some of the things they think about" (26).

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