

Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME

54

# Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works  
of the Most Significant and Widely  
Studied Poets of World Literature*

## Volume 54

*Timothy J. Sisler*  
Project Editor



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GALE



## Poetry Criticism, Vol. 54

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## Preface

**P**oetry Criticism (*PC*) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, *PC* offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by *PC* supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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A **Cumulative Title Index** lists in alphabetical order all individual poems, book-length poems, and collection titles contained in the *PC* series. Titles of poetry collections and separately published poems are printed in italics, while titles of individual poems are printed in roman type with quotation marks. Each title is followed by the author's last name and corresponding volume and page numbers where commentary on the work is located. English-language translations of original foreign-language titles are cross-referenced to the foreign titles so that all references to discussion of a work are combined in one listing.

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Linden Peach, "Man, Nature and Wordsworth: American Versions," *British Influence on the Birth of American Literature*, (Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), 29-57; reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*, vol. 20, ed. Ellen McGeagh (Detroit: The Gale Group), 37-40.

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# Raymond Carver

## 1938-1988

Contemporary American poet, essayist, and short story writer.

The following entry provides criticism on Carver's poetry from 1987 through 1999.

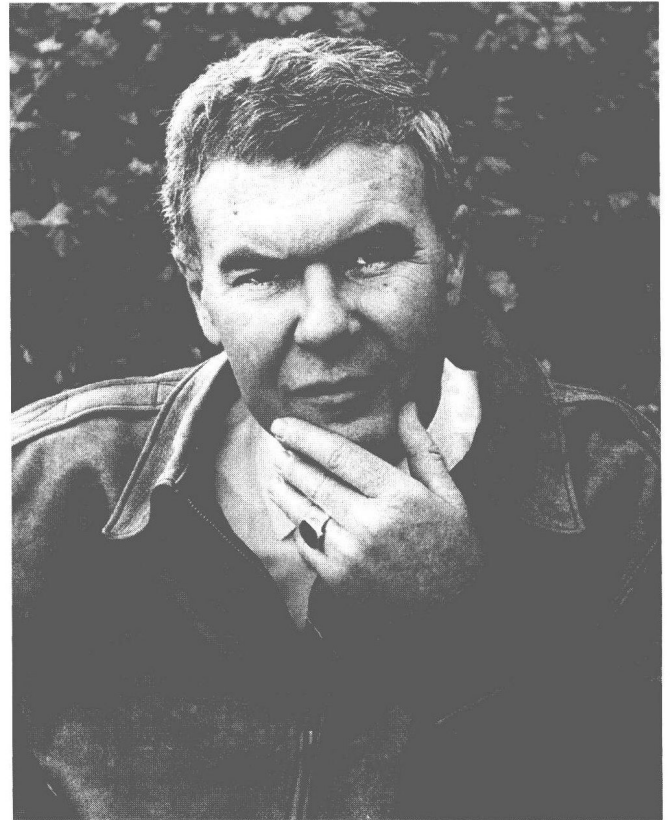
### INTRODUCTION

Considered a master of the short story, Carver also was an accomplished poet. He drew inspiration from his troubled youth and afflicted early adulthood to capture in poetry the effects of chance and circumstance on people trying to live with stoic dignity. As in his short fiction, Carver's poems are noted for their plain language, memorable characters, and realistic depiction of hardships in life. Carver was awarded several prestigious fellowships and held teaching appointments at major universities, including Syracuse, Stanford, and several campuses of the University of California. Just prior to his death, Carver married his companion of more than ten years, acclaimed poet Tess Gallagher.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Hailed as a modern-day Stephen Crane and even as the American version of acclaimed, Russian short-story writer Anton Chekhov, Carver wrote of the people with whom he lived in the Pacific Northwest—the poorly educated working-class who scrape together a tenuous living. His poetry often considers the everyday people who continually struggle against ignorance, chance, and the cold circumstances faced by those for whom life is a continual battle to maintain a modicum of comfort and security. It was, after all, such a life into which Carver was born May 25, 1938, in Clatskanie, Oregon.

When Carver was three the family moved to Yakima, Washington, where his father worked in a sawmill. Growing up interested mostly in girls, cars, hunting, and fishing, Carver was a diffident student but recognized early in life his tremendous urge to write. After finishing high school, Carver moved with his father to northern California to work in a sawmill. Less than a year later he returned to Yakima and married Maryann Burk, who was sixteen years old and within the year gave birth to their first child. By the time Carver was



21 years old, he had two children, and was working low-wage jobs with his wife to pay their bills while attending college part time at Chico State. Carver enrolled in a class taught by the novelist John Gardner. Gardner was a patient and attentive mentor to Carver, and probably a model for Carver the teacher, who was revered by the many students he subsequently taught in writing programs across the country. Carver eventually graduated from Humboldt State in 1963, and the following fall he studied as a fellow at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Financial difficulties interrupted his stay, and by 1967 the Carvers filed for bankruptcy.

Despite financial insecurity, Carver continued to edit textbooks and write stories and poems. By 1970, his stories were earning acclaim and awards, but his life started to unravel as he turned to heavy drinking. It was during this time that Carver accepted positions at several campuses of the University of California, at Stanford, and, in 1973, at the Iowa Writer's Workshop. By 1974,

Carver was increasingly incapacitated by alcoholism; the Carvers filed for bankruptcy the second time, Maryann began drinking, and their marriage was disintegrating. Finally, in 1977 Carver quit drinking for good. Shortly thereafter he met the poet Tess Gallagher, with whom he would share and develop his poetry for nearly ten years. In 1978 Carver split from Maryann and moved to El Paso, Texas, where Gallagher later joined him. The two poets shared their personal and artistic lives together, eventually marrying in June 1988.

In 1980 Carver was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship for fiction, and he and Gallagher began teaching at Syracuse University and spending their summers in her home town of Port Angeles, Washington. Throughout the 1980s, collections of his stories were published by major presses, he was a frequent contributor to *Poetry Magazine* and the *New Yorker*, and he received a five-year fellowship from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. In 1987 Carver was diagnosed with lung cancer. He died shortly after marrying Gallagher, on August 2, 1988, in Port Angeles, at age 50.

## MAJOR WORKS

Carver's acclaim comes largely from his fiction, but he published poems in numerous publications and several volumes of collections. *Where Water Comes Together with Other Water* (1985), won the Levinson Prize for poetry and a Los Angeles Times book prize. Critics questioned whether these were indeed poems. In the *New York Times Book Review* the poet Carol Muske praised Carver's "credible voice" but declared that the poems were "rehearsals for poems, anecdotes precedent to poetry." Writing in *Poetry*, Dave Smith concludes that they were indeed poems, that in fact they are "often very good, very moving, very memorable," but that Carver the poet is an "acquired taste," a bit like a "primitive painter." In what Gallagher called "the most astute essay on [Carver's] poetry," Gregory Kuzma wrote that there was a discovery in the poems collected in *Ultramarine* (1986): "a sudden burst of emotion, restraint where it is unexpected, self-control masterfully exhibited in the midst of exasperation, juxtaposition to show us the world as a new place, fertile, inexhaustible, and more strange than we ever knew or wanted it to be." In the *Kenyon Review* Fred Chappell raised what he called the "Carver Myth" before dismissing *A New Path to the Waterfall* (1989) because, as he wrote, "the only trouble with Raymond Carver's poems is that he was not a poet." Gallagher, however, in the introduction to that final collection that Carver worked on until his death wrote that "perhaps the best way to characterize these poems [in *A New Path to the Waterfall*] is by their dis-ease, the way in which a wildness, a strangeness, can erupt and carry us into realms of unreason with no way to turn back."

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Carver once wrote that he would be pleased if on his tombstone it was written "'poet and short-story writer—and occasional essayist' in that order." Gallagher has written that "poetry was a spiritual necessity" for Carver, but critics have tended to approach his poetry for the clues it may yield to better understanding his short stories. The novelist Russell Banks, writing in the *Atlantic Monthly*, compared Carver to Stephen Crane, for "both wrote excellent poetry as well as the fiction for which they are better known." Banks also pointed to another factor in critically assessing Carver's work when he observed that "not since Chekhov has an author's good nature been so much celebrated after his death." Banks is ultimately moved by Carver's work because, as a fellow resident of an impoverished rural America, "I instantly recognize and love and am terrified by the empty spaces, the stillness, and the stoicism of Raymond Carver's stories and poems." A. O. Scott, writing in the *New York Review of Books*, acknowledged the problem of separating Carver the man from works of Carver, and the stories from the poems. He thought the best poems were those most like Carver's stories, and "the best of Carver's writing now seems, in retrospect, to be suffused with the best of his personality—affable, humble, battered, wise . . . [but] the adversities and triumphs of Carver's life have obscured his work, that we now read that work through the screen of biography, and that his identity as a writer is, in consequence, blurred." But Scott eventually concludes that "Carver was an artist of a rare and valuable kind: he told simple stories, and made it look hard." One of the most unambiguous and uncharacteristically unadorned assessments comes from renowned international author Salman Rushdie: "Read everything Raymond Carver wrote."

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## PRINCIPAL WORKS

### Poetry

*Near Klamath* 1968  
*Winter Insomnia* 1970  
*At Night the Salmon Move* 1976  
*Two Poems* 1982  
*Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories, 1966-1982* 1983  
*This Water* 1985  
*Where Water Comes Together with Other Water* 1985  
*Ultramarine* 1986  
*In a Marine Light: Selected Poems* 1987  
*Those Days: Early Writings by Raymond Carver: Eleven Poems* 1987

*A New Path to the Waterfall* 1989  
*No Heroics, Please: Uncollected Writings* (poetry and essays) 1989  
*All of Us: The Collected Poems* 1996

### Other Major Works

*Put Yourself in My Shoes* (short stories) 1974  
*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (short stories) 1976  
*Furious Seasons and Other Stories* (short stories) 1977  
*What We Talk about When We Talk about Love* (short stories) 1981  
*The Pheasant* (short stories) 1982  
*Cathedral* (short stories) 1984  
*If It Please You* (short stories) 1984  
*The Stories of Raymond Carver* (short stories) 1985  
*Where I'm Calling From: New and Selected Stories* (short stories) 1988  
*Short Cuts: Selected Stories* (short stories) 1993  
*Call if You Need Me: The Uncollected Fiction and Other Prose* (prose) 2001

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## CRITICISM

### Raymond Carver and Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory (interview date 1987)

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[In the following interview, Carver reflects on his childhood, his writing methods, and his literary influences.]

To be inside a Raymond Carver story is a bit like standing in a model kitchen at Sears—you experience a weird feeling of disjuncture that comes from being in a place where things *appear* to be real and familiar, but where a closer look shows that the turkey is papier-mâché, the broccoli is rubber, and the frilly curtains cover a blank wall. In Carver's fiction things are simply not as they appear. Or, rather, things are *more* than they appear to be, for often commonplace objects—a broken refrigerator, a car, a cigarette, a bottle of beer or whiskey—become transformed in Carver's hands, from realistic props in realistic stories to powerful, emotionally charged signifiers in and of themselves. Language itself undergoes a similar transformation. Since there is little authorial presence and since Carver's characters are often inarticulate and bewildered about the turns their

lives have taken, their seemingly banal conversations are typically endowed with unspoken intensity and meaning. Watching Carver's characters interact, then, is rather like spending an evening with two close friends who you know have had a big fight just before you arrived: even the most ordinary gestures and exchanges have transformed meanings, hidden tensions, emotional depths.

Although Carver published two books of poetry in the late 1960s and early '70s (*Near Klamath* in 1968 and *Winter Insomnia* in 1970), it was his book of stories, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please*, published in 1976 and nominated for the National Book Award, that established his national reputation as a writer with a unique voice and style. Pared down, stark, yet intense, these stories can perhaps best be compared in their achievement to work outside literature, Bruce Springsteen's album *Nebraska*. Like Springsteen, Carver writes about troubled people on the outs—out of work, out of love, out of touch—whose confusion, turmoils, and poignancy are conveyed through an interplay of surface details. His next collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), takes this elliptical, spare style even further. With just enough description to set the scene, just enough interpretation of motivation to clarify the action, these stories offer the illusion of the authorless story in which "reality" is transcribed and meaning arises without mediation. This move toward greater and greater economy was abandoned by Carver in *Cathedral* (1983); as the following conversation indicates, changes in his personal life affected his aesthetics. While still written in his distinctive voice, these stories explore more interior territory using less constricted language.

This change (mirrored as well in his most recent collection of poems, *Ultramarine* [1986]) is apparent not just in style but in the themes found in *Cathedral*, which contains several stories of hope and spiritual communion. As we drove to Carver's home outside Port Angeles, Washington, we were still formulating questions designed to reveal why *Cathedral* was less bleak, less constricted. But nothing very devious or complex was required. Sitting in his living room, which offers an amazing vista of the blustery Strait of Juan de Fuca, Carver was obviously a happy man—happy in the homelife he shares with Tess Gallagher, his work, his victory over alcohol, and his new direction. Replying to our questions in a soft, low voice with the same kind of direct honesty evident in his fiction, Carver seemed less like an author of three collections of stories; a book of essays, short stories, and poems (*Fires*, 1983); and three volumes of poetry than he did a writer starting out, eager to begin work, anxious to see where his life would lead.

[Larry McCaffery]: In an essay in *Fires*, you say, "To write a novel, a writer should be living in a world that

*makes sense, a world that the writer can believe in, draw a bead on, and then write about accurately. A world that will, for a time anyway, stay fixed in one place. Along with this there has to be a belief in the essential correctness of that world." Am I right in assuming that you've arrived at a place, physically and psychologically, where you can believe in the "correctness" of your world enough to sustain a novel-length imaginary world?*

[Raymond Carver]: I do feel I've arrived at such a place. My life is very different now than it used to be; it seems much more comprehensible to me. It was previously almost impossible for me to imagine trying to write a novel in the state of incomprehension, despair, really, that I was in. I have hope now, and I didn't have hope then—"hope" in the sense of belief. I believe now that the world will exist for me tomorrow in the same way it exists for me today. That didn't used to be the case. For a long time I found myself living by the seat of my pants, making things terribly difficult for myself and everyone around me by my drinking. In this second life, this post-drinking life, I still retain a certain sense of pessimism, I suppose, but I also have belief in and love for the things of this world. Needless to say, I'm not talking about microwave ovens, jet planes, and expensive cars.

[LM]: *Does this mean you have plans to try your hand at a novel?*

Yes. Maybe. Maybe after I finish this new manuscript of poems. Maybe then I'll return to fiction and do some longer fiction, a novel or a novella. I feel like I'm reaching the end of the time of writing poetry. In another month or so I'll have written something like 150-180 poems during this period, so I feel like I'm about to run out this string, and then I can go back to fiction. It's important to me, though, to have this new book of poems in manuscript in the cupboard. When *Cathedral* came out, that cupboard was absolutely bare; I don't want something like that to happen again. Tobias Wolff recently finished a book of stories that he turned in to Houghton Mifflin; he asked me if it was hard for me to start work again after finishing a book, because he was having a hard time getting going again. I told him not to worry about it *now*, but that he should make sure he's well along on something by the time his book is ready to come out. If you've emptied all your cupboards, the way I had after *Cathedral*, it can be difficult to catch your stride again.

[Sinda Gregory]: *Your newfound "belief in love for the things of this world" is very evident in some of the stories in Cathedral, especially in the title story.*

That story was very much an "opening up" process for me—I mean that in every sense. "Cathedral" was a larger, grander story than anything I had previously

written. When I began writing that story I felt that I was breaking out of something I had put myself into, both personally and aesthetically. I simply couldn't go on any farther in the direction I had been going in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. Oh, I *could* have, I suppose, but I didn't want to. Some of the stories were becoming too attenuated. I didn't write anything for five or six months after that book came out. I literally wrote nothing except letters. So it was especially pleasing to me that, when I finally sat down to write again, I wrote *that* story, "Cathedral." It felt like I had never written anything that way before. I could let myself *go* in some way, I didn't have to impose the restrictions on myself that I had in the earlier stories. The last story I wrote for the collection was "Fever," which was also just about the longest story I've ever written. And it's affirmative, I think, positive in its outlook. Really, the whole collection is different, and the next book is going to be different as well!

[LM]: *What does it mean to a writer like you to find yourself, relatively suddenly, in such a different frame of mind? Do you find it difficult today to write about the despair, emotional turmoil, and hopelessness that is so much a part of the vision of your earlier fiction?*

No, because when I need to open this door to my imagination—stare out over the window casement, what Keats called his "magic casements"—I can remember exactly the texture of that despair and hopelessness, I can still taste it, feel it. The things that are emotionally meaningful to me are still very much alive and available to me, even though the circumstances of my personal life have changed. Merely because my physical surroundings and my mental state are different today doesn't mean, of course, that I still don't know exactly what I was talking about in the earlier stories. I can bring all that back if I choose to, but I'm finding that I am not driven to write about it exclusively. That's not to say I'm interested in writing about life here, where I live in Four Seasons Ranch, this chichi development. If you look carefully at *Cathedral*, you'll find that many of those stories have to do with that other life, which is still very much with me. But not all of them do, which is why the book feels different to me.

[LM]: *A striking example of the differences you're referring to can be seen when you compare "A Small Good Thing" (in Cathedral) with the earlier version, "The Bath," which appeared in What We Talk About. The differences between the two versions are clearly fundamental.*

Certainly there's a lot more optimism in "A Small Good Thing." In my own mind I consider them to be really two entirely different stories, not just different versions of the same story; it's hard to even look on them as coming from the same source. I went back to that one,

as well as several others, because I felt there was unfinished business that needed attending to. The story hadn't been told originally; it had been messed around with, condensed and compressed in "The Bath" to highlight the qualities of menace that I wanted to emphasize—you see this with the business about the baker, the phone call, with its menacing voice on the other line, the bath, and so on. But I still felt there was unfinished business, so in the midst of writing these other stories for *Cathedral* I went back to "The Bath" and tried to see what aspects of it needed to be enhanced, redrawn, reimagined. When I was done, I was amazed because it seemed so much better. I've had people tell me that they much prefer "The Bath," which is fine, but "A Small Good Thing" seems to me to be a better story.

[SG]: *Many of your stories either open with the ordinary being slightly disturbed by this sense of menace you've just mentioned, or they develop in that direction. Is this tendency the result of your conviction that the world is menacing for most people? Or does it have more to do with an aesthetic choice—that menace contains more interesting possibilities for storytelling?*

The world is a menacing place for many of the people in my stories, yes. The people I've chosen to write about *do* feel menace, and I think many, if not most, people feel the world is a menacing place. Probably not so many people who will see this interview feel menace in the sense I'm talking about. Most of our friends and acquaintances, yours and mine, don't feel this way. But try living on the other side of the tracks for a while. Menace is there, and it's palpable. As to the second part of your question, that's true, too. Menace does contain, for me at least, more interesting possibilities to explore.

[SG]: *When you look back at your stories, do you find "unfinished business" in most of them?*

This may have to do with this newfound confidence, but I feel that the stories in *Cathedral* are *finished* in a way I rarely felt about my stories previously. I've never even read the book since I saw it in bound galleys. I was happy about those stories, not worried about them; I felt there was simply no need to mess around with them, make new judgments about them. A lot of this surely has to do with this whole complicated business about the new circumstances in my life, my sense of confidence in what I'm doing with my life and my work. For such a long time, when I was an alcoholic, I was very *un*-confident and had such very low self-esteem, both as a person and as a writer, that I was always questioning my judgments about everything. Every good thing that has happened to me during the last several years has been an incentive to do more and do better. I know I've felt that recently in writing all these poems, and it's affecting my fiction as well. I'm more sure of

my voice, more sure of *something*. I felt a bit tentative when I started writing those poems, maybe partly because I hadn't written any for so long, but I soon found a voice—and that voice gave me confidence. Now when I start writing something, and I mean *now* in these last few years, I don't have that sense of fooling around, of being tentative, of not knowing what to do, of having to sharpen a lot of pencils. When I go to my desk now and pick up a pen, I really know what I have to do. It's a totally different feeling.

[SG]: *What was it that made you return to poetry after all those years of focusing exclusively on fiction?*

I came out here to Port Angeles with the intention of bringing to completion a long piece of fiction I had started back at Syracuse. But when I got out here, I sat around for five days or so, just enjoying the peace and quiet (I didn't have a television or radio), a welcome change from all the distractions going on at Syracuse. After those five days I found myself reading a little poetry. Then one night I sat down and wrote a poem. I hadn't written any poetry in two years or more, and somewhere in the back of my mind I was lamenting the fact that I hadn't written any—or really even given any serious thought to poetry writing for a long time. During the period when I was writing the stories that went into *Cathedral*, for example, I was feeling I couldn't have written a poem if someone had put a gun to my head. I wasn't even *reading* any poetry, except for Tess's. At any rate, I wrote this first poem that night, and then the next day I got up and wrote another poem. The day after that I wrote *another* poem. This went on for ten straight weeks; the poems seemed to be coming out of this wonderful rush of energy. At night I'd feel totally empty, absolutely whipped out, and I'd wonder if anything would be left the next morning. But the next day there *was* something—the well hadn't gone dry. So I'd get up, drink coffee, and go to my desk and write another poem. When it was happening I felt almost as if I were being given a good shaking, and suddenly my keys were falling out of my pockets. I've never had a period in which I've taken such joy in the act of writing as I did in those two months.

[LM]: *You've said that it no longer matters where you are living as far as your writing is concerned. Has that feeling changed?*

I'd certainly retract that statement nowadays. Having this place here in Port Angeles has been very important to me, and I'm sure coming out here helped me get started writing poetry. I think it was getting clear away from the outdoors and my contact with nature that made me feel I was losing whatever it was that made me want to write poetry. I had spent the summer of 1982 out here (not in this house, but in a little cabin a few miles from here), and I wrote four stories in a fairly

short period of time, although they took place indoors and didn't have anything specifically to do with this locale. But without question my poetry came back to me because of this relocation. It had been increasingly difficult for me to work in Syracuse, which is why I pulled up stakes and came out here. There was just too much going on back in Syracuse, especially after *Cathedral* came out and there was so much happening in connection with the book. There were people coming in and out of the house, and a lot of other business that never seemed to end. The telephone was ringing all the time, and Tess was teaching, and there were a certain number of social obligations. This might only mean having an occasional dinner with dear friends, whom it was always a pleasure to see, but all this was taking me away from my work. It got to the point where even hearing the cleaning woman, hearing her make the bed or vacuum the rug or wash the dishes, bothered me. So I came out here, and when Tess left to go back to Syracuse on September 1, I stayed on for another four weeks to write and fish. I did a lot of work during those weeks, and when I got back to Syracuse I thought I could keep up that rhythm. I did manage to for a few days, but then I found myself limited to editing the stuff I had written out here. Finally, the last few weeks or so, it was all I could do to make it from day to day. I would consider it a good day if I could take care of my correspondence. That's a hell of a situation for a writer to be in. I wasn't sorry to leave, even though I have some dear friends there.

[SG]: *In the Esquire article you wrote about your father, you mention a poem you wrote, "Photograph of My Father in His 22nd Year," and comment that "the poem was a way of trying to connect up with him." Does poetry offer you a more direct way of connecting to your past?*

I'd say it does. It's a more immediate way, a faster means of connecting. Doing these poems satisfies my desire to write something, and tell a story, every day—sometimes two or three times a day, even four or five times a day. But in regard to connecting up to my past, it must be said of my poems (and my stories, too) that even though they may all have some basis in my experience, they are also *imaginative*. They're totally made up, most of them.

[LM]: *So even in your poetry that persona who is speaking is never precisely "you"?*

No. Same as in my stories, those stories told in the first person, for instance. Those "I" narrators aren't me.

[SG]: *In your poem "For Semra, with Martial Vigor," your narrator says to a woman, "All poems are love poems." Is this true in some sense of your own poetry?*

Every poem is an act of love, and faith. There is so little other reward for writing poems, either monetarily or in terms of, you know, fame and glory, that the act

of writing a poem has to be an act that justifies itself and really has no other end in sight. To *want* to do it, you really have to love doing it. In that sense, then, every poem *is* a "love poem."

[LM]: *Have you found it a problem to move back and forth between genres? Is a different composition process involved?*

The juggling has never seemed a problem. I suppose it would have been more unusual in a writer who hadn't worked in both areas to the extent that I have. Actually I've always felt and maintained that the poem is closer in its effect and in the way it is composed to a short story than the short story is to a novel. Stories and poems have more in common in what the writing is aiming for, in the compression of language and emotion, and in the care and control required to achieve their effects. To me, the process of writing a story or a poem has never seemed very different. Everything I write comes from the same spring, or source, whether it's a story or an essay or a poem or a screenplay. When I sit down to write, I literally start with a sentence or a line. I always have to have that first line in my head, whether it's a poem or a story. Later on everything else is subject to change, but that first line rarely changes. Somehow it shoves me on to the second line, and then the process begins to take on momentum and acquire a direction. Nearly everything I write goes through many revisions, and I do a lot of backing up, to-and-froing. I don't mind revising; I actually enjoy it, in fact. Don Hall has taken seven years to write and polish the poems that make up his new book. He's revised some of the poems a hundred and fifty times or so. I'm not *that* obsessive, but I do a lot of revising, it's true. And I think friends of mine are a bit dubious about how my poems are going to turn out. They just don't think poems can or should be written as fast as I wrote these. I'll just have to show them.

[LM]: *One possible source of interaction between your poetry and fiction has to do with the way the impact of your stories often seems to center on a single image: a peacock, a cigarette, a car. These images seem to function like poetic images—that is, they organize the story, draw our responses into a complex set of associations. How conscious are you of developing this kind of controlling image?*

I'm not consciously creating a central image in my fiction that would control a story the way images, or an image, often control a work of poetry. I have an image in my head but it seems to emerge out of the story in an organic, natural fashion. For instance, I didn't realize in advance that the peacock image would so dominate "Feathers." The peacock just seemed like something a family who lived in the country on a small farm might have running around the house. It *wasn't* something I



placed there in an effort to have it perform as a symbol. When I'm writing I don't think in terms of developing symbols or of what an image will do. When I hit on an image that seems to be working and it stands for what it is supposed to stand for (it may stand for several other things as well), that's great. But I don't think of them self-consciously. They seem to evolve, occur. I truly invent them and then certain things seem to form around them as events occur, recollection and imagination begin to color them, and so forth.

[SG]: *In an essay in **Fires**, you make a remark that perfectly describes for me one of the most distinctive things about your fiction: "It's possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace language and to endow those things—a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring—with immense, even startling power." I realize that every story is different in this regard, but how does one go about investing these ordinary objects with such power and emphasis?*

I'm not given to rhetoric or abstraction in my life, my thinking, or my writing, so when I write about people I want them to be placed within a setting that must be made as palpable as possible. This might mean including as part of the setting a television or a table or a felt-tipped pen lying on a desk, but if these things are going to be introduced into the scene at all, they shouldn't be inert. I don't mean that they should take on a life of their own, precisely, but they should make their presence *felt* in some way. If you are going to describe a spoon or a chair or a TV set, you don't want simply to set these things into the scene and let them go. You want to give them some weight, connecting these things to the lives around them. I see these objects as playing a role in the stories; they're not "characters" in the sense that the people are, but they are *there* and I want my readers to be aware that they're there, to know that this ashtray is here, that the TV is there (and that it's going or it's not going), that the fireplace has old pop cans in it.

[SG]: *What appeals to you about writing stories and poems, rather than longer forms?*

For one thing, whenever I pick up a literary magazine, the first thing I look at is the poetry, and then I'll read the stories. I hardly ever read anything else, the essays, reviews, what have you. So I suppose I was drawn to the *form*, and I mean the brevity, of both poetry and short fiction from the beginning. Also, poetry and short fiction seemed to be things I could get done in a reasonable period of time. When I started out as a writer, I was moving around a lot, and there were daily distractions, weird jobs, family responsibilities. My life seemed very fragile, so I wanted to be able to start something that I felt I had a reasonable chance of see-

ing through to a finish—which meant I needed to finish things in a hurry, a short period of time. As I just mentioned, poetry and fiction seemed so close to one another in form and intent, so close to what I was interested in doing, that early on I didn't have any trouble moving back and forth between them.

[LM]: *Who were the poets you were reading and admiring, perhaps being influenced by, when you were developing your notions of the craft of poetry? Your outdoor settings may suggest James Dickey, but a more likely influence seems to me to be William Carlos Williams.*

Williams was indeed a big influence; he was my greatest hero. When I started out writing poetry I was reading his poems. Once I even had the temerity to write him and ask for a poem for a little magazine I was starting at Chico State University called *Selection*. I think we put out three issues; I edited the first issue. But William Carlos Williams actually sent me a poem. I was thrilled and surprised to see his signature under the poem. That's an understatement. Dickey's poetry did not mean so much, even though he was just coming into his full powers at about the time when I was starting out in the early '60s. I liked Creeley's poetry, and later Robert Bly, Don Hall, Galway Kinnell, James Wright, Dick Hugo, Gary Snyder, Archie Ammons, Merwin, Ted Hughes. I really didn't know anything when I was starting out, I just sort of read what people gave me, but I've never been drawn to highly intellectualized poetry—the metaphysical poets or whatever.

[LM]: *Is abstraction or intellectualism something that usually turns you off in a work?*

I don't think it's an anti-intellectual bias, if that's what you mean. There are just some works that I can respond to and others operating at levels I don't connect with. I suppose I'm not interested in what you might call the "well-made poem," for example. When I see one I'm tempted to react by saying, "Oh, that's just poetry." I'm looking for something else, something that's *not just* a good poem. Practically any good graduate student in a creative writing program can write a good poem. I'm looking for something beyond that. Maybe something rougher.

[SG]: *A reader is immediately struck with the "pared down" quality of your work, especially your work before Cathedral. Was this style something that evolved, or had it been with you from the beginning?*

From the very beginning I loved the rewriting process as much as the initial execution. I've always loved taking sentences and playing with them, rewriting them, paring them down to where they seem solid somehow. This may have resulted from being John Gardner's

student, because he told me something I immediately responded to: If you can say it in fifteen words rather than twenty or thirty words, then say it in fifteen words. That struck me with the force of revelation. There I was, groping to find my own way, and here someone was telling me something that somehow conjoined with what I already wanted to do. It was the most natural thing in the world for me to go back and refine what was happening on the page and eliminate the padding. The last few days I've been reading Flaubert's letters, and he says some things that seem relevant to my own aesthetic. At one point when Flaubert was writing *Madame Bovary*, he would knock off at midnight or one in the morning and write letters to his mistress, Louise Colet, about the construction of the book and his general notion of aesthetics. One passage he wrote her that really struck me was when he said, "The artist in his work must be like God in his creation—invisible and all powerful; he must be everywhere felt but nowhere seen." I like the last part of that especially. There's another interesting remark when Flaubert is writing to his editors at the magazine that published the book in installments. They were just getting ready to serialize *Madame Bovary* and were going to make a lot of cuts in the text because they were afraid they were going to be closed down by the government if they published it just as Flaubert wrote it, so Flaubert tells them that if they make the cuts they can't publish the book, but they'll still be friends. The last line of this letter is: "I know how to distinguish between literature and literary business"—another insight I respond to. Even in these letters his prose is astonishing: "Prose must stand upright from one end to the other, like a wall whose ornamentation continues down to its very base." "Prose is architecture." "Everything must be done coldly, with poise." "Last week I spent five days writing one page." One of the interesting things about the Flaubert book is the way it demonstrates how self-consciously he was setting out to do something very special and different with prose. He consciously tried to make prose an art form. If you look at what else was being published in Europe in 1855, when *Madame Bovary* was published, you realize what an achievement the book really is.

[LM]: In addition to John Gardner, were there other writers who affected your fictional sensibility early on? Hemingway comes immediately to mind.

Hemingway was certainly an influence. I didn't read him until I was in college and then I read the wrong book (*Across the River and into the Trees*) and didn't like him very much. But a little later I read *In Our Time* in a class and I found that he was marvelous. I remember thinking, This is it; if you can write prose like this, you've done something.

[LM]: In your essays you've spoken out against literary tricks or gimmicks—yet I would argue that your own works are really experimental in the same sense that

Hemingway's fiction was. What's the difference between literary experimentalism that seems legitimate to you and the kind that isn't?

I'm against tricks that call attention to themselves in an effort to be clever or merely devious. I read a review this morning in *Publishers Weekly* of a novel that is coming out next spring; the book sounded so disjointed and filled with things that have nothing to do with life, or literature as I know it, that I felt certain I wouldn't read it except under pain of death. A writer mustn't lose sight of the story. I'm not interested in works that are all texture and no flesh and blood. I guess I'm old fashioned enough to feel that the reader must somehow be involved at the human level. And that there is still, or ought to be, a compact between writer and reader. Writing, or any form of artistic endeavor, is not just expression, it's communication. When a writer stops being truly interested in communicating something and is only aiming at expressing something, and that not very well—well, they can express themselves by going out to the streetcorner and hollering. A short story or a novel or a poem should deliver a certain number of emotional punches. You can judge that work by how strong these punches are and how many are thrown. If it's all just a bunch of head trips or games, I'm not interested. Work like that is just chaff: it'll blow away with the first good wind.

[LM]: Are there out-and-out experimentalists whom you do admire? I was wondering about your reaction to Donald Barthelme's work, for example.

I like his work. I didn't care much for it when I first started reading it. It seemed so strange that I stopped reading him for a while. Also, he was, or so it seemed to me, the generation right ahead of mine, and it wouldn't do at the time to like it all that much! But then I read *Sixty Stories* a couple of years ago. He's terrific! I found that the more I read his stories, the more regard I began to have for them. Barthelme has done a world of work, he's a true innovator who's not being devious or stupid or mean spirited or experimenting for experimenting's sake. He's uneven, but then who isn't? Certainly his effect on creative writing classes has been tremendous (as they say, he's often imitated but never duplicated). He's like Allen Ginsberg in that he opened a gate, and afterward a great flood of work by other people poured through, some of it good and a lot of it awful. I'm not worried that all that bad stuff which has followed after Barthelme or Ginsberg will push the good stuff off the shelves. It will just disappear on its own.

[SG]: One of the nontraditional aspects of your own fiction is that your stories don't tend to have the "shape" of the classically rendered story: the introduction/conflict/development/resolution structure of