Abstract

Cameron Cushing’s essay examines the use of the “negative pastoral” in Carver’s short story “The Compartment,” from his 1983 collection *Cathedral*. Raymond Carver explores the emotional landscape of Myers, who is en route to Strasbourg, France, to visit his son. Carver locates Myers’ emotional landscape within a locus where Terry Gifford’s external “contextual pastoral” intersects Martin Scofield’s internal “negative pastoral.” It is Scofield’s concept of the “bizarre” actions that lead to “strange and contorted expressions” of emotion that provide a lens for decoding Myers’ decision to break his appointment with his son, leading to his calm acceptance to finding himself on re-coupled train car that is taking him to an unknown destination toward a newly recontextualized emotional landscape.

The Negative Pastoral in Raymond Carver’s “The Compartment”

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While Raymond Carver was categorized early in his career as a Northwest American writer, Carver stated that it was the “emotional landscape [he was] most interested in.” As a result, Carver believed his stories could take place anywhere, and his short story “The Compartment” confirms that notion. I argue that “The Compartment,” a later story from his 1983 collection *Cathedral*, is an example of what Carver described as an “emotional landscape,” placing his characters into landscapes similar to what Terry Gifford calls “contextual pastoral” (2) in order to reveal what Martin Scofield identifies as a “negative pastoral” (248).

Pastoral literature, “traditionally takes the lives of the lowest social classes—originally shepherds and country labourers—and finds in them fundamental forms of human nature and behaviour” (243), notes Martin Scofield, who sees elements of the traditional form of pastoral as evident in some of Carver’s characters who are “generally working class [. . .] preoccupied with the simplest elements of life” (244). While some of Carver’s short stories offer traditional pastoral landscapes—rolling hills, green pastures, rivers, and so on—most others are set in urban landscapes. Terry Gifford, in his book *Pastoral*, defines what he views as a kind of “contextual pastoral,” that is, “literature that describes the [pastoral] country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban” (2). Gifford’s sense of contextualizing the pastoral is useful when considering the presence of contrasting or augmenting rural and urban elements that can add meaningful dissonance or tensions into some of Carver’s short stories. Moreover, these tensions can generate what Scofield identifies as
aspects of the “negative pastoral,” which includes “bizarre” elements of “essential passions” . . . twisted into strange and contorted expression” (248). I take Gifford’s “contextual pastoral” to mean a literature that demonstrates how the external world is implicitly or explicitly a reflection of the character’s “negative pastoral”—in short, his internal landscape. In Raymond Carver’s “The Compartment,” the external landscapes Myers observes outside his train compartment window contribute to tensions of the “negative pastoral” of his internal landscape.

Myers is traveling through Europe by train prior to arriving in Strasbourg; his plan is to spend several days there with his son before making his way to Paris before he will fly home to the US. Ironically, Myers views his son, to whom no name is given, as an interloper because Myers believes his son to be the reason his marriage to the boy’s mother failed. This is a bizarre conclusion, one that is “far from universal” (248), though one which Scofield sees as a recurring element of the negative pastoral that is evident in some of Carver’s writing. Perhaps the most bizarre aspect is that after eight years, Myers denies his son and himself any chance of reconciliation based on what appears to be the impassioned revulsion of his only son.

Carver reveals the negative pastoral of Myers action in the early section of the story as he shows Myers focusing on the landscape outside the train compartment in which he is traveling. As a minimalist, Carver uses his artistic energy to describe a contextual pastoral that expresses Myers’ negative pastoral within a train compartment. Moreover, in order to achieve this mode of expression, Carver has his protagonist extensively gazing out the window, making it obvious that what Myers observes are some of the most important moments within the story. Myers finds the rural European landscapes to be pleasant:

> It was early in the morning and mist hung over the green fields that passed by outside. Now and then Myers saw a farmhouse and its out-buildings, everything surrounded by a wall. He thought this might be a good way to live—in an old house surrounded by a wall. (393)

Previous to these pleasant images, Myers reminisces about the last time he saw his son and how it was a “horrible scene” as Myers’ wife broke dishes and cups one at a time while he asks her to stop. When his son “charged him” in defense of his mother, Myers “sidestepped and got him in a headlock while the boy wept and pummeled Myers on the back and kidneys. Myers had him, and while he had him, he made the most of it. He slammed him into the wall and threatened to kill him” (393). Instead of confronting and trying to address his bizarre passionate hate towards his son,
however, Myers shakes his head as if to eject that “horrible” memory from his consciousness. In an act of escapism, Myers gazes out of the train, imagining himself living a life within the pleasant pastoral landscapes he sees, in which farm houses stand in the middle of farm fields. What these first contextual landscapes confirm is Myers’ escapist tendencies and his inability to live within his own reality. As such, as “Compartment” begins, readers are given a fictional character who lacks the personal character to make peace with his own negative pastoral.

The memory of the father-son fight serves to escalate the underlying menace of the story. After the expensive watch that Myers bought as a reconciliation gift for his son is stolen, Myers becomes filled with anger. This current anger over the stolen watch calls up that anger Myers has had ever since he last saw his son eight years ago during their fight. Readers are shown Myers looking outside the slowing train as his anger is projected onto an urban landscape:

Farming and grazing land had given over to industrial plants with unpronounceable names on the fronts of the buildings. The train began slowing. . . . He got up and took his suitcase down. He held it on his lap while he looked out the window at this hateful place. (398)

During this time, Myers’ contextual pastoral changes. The pleasant pastoral rural landscape has been replaced by an unpleasant urban landscape of “industrial plants” that he views as a “hateful place.” This shift in the contextual pastoral initiates and enacts the negative pastoral as Myers’ perception of the pastoral landscape shifts with his rising anger as his internal landscape becomes negative; his bizarre passion becomes the lens through which he sees the world. Using the words “given over,” unpronounceable,” and “hateful” creates a sense of dark angering tension, and as the pace picks up in these few sentences even though the train is slowing to a stop, Carver’s narrative tone matches Myers’ internal landscape. Instead of describing what Myers is feeling and the landscape outside the train as opposite, Carver expertly utilizes the urban landscape to offer Myers an opportunity to confront his negative pastoral.

Prior to pulling into the Strasbourg train station and having his son’s watch stolen, the contextual pastoral represented a stable place of escape. Yet the landscape no longer represents a sense of escape, but instead prompts a realization:

It came to [Myers] that he didn’t want to see the boy after all. He was shocked by this realization and for a moment felt diminished by the meanness of it. He shook his head. In a life-time of foolish actions, this trip was possibly the most foolish thing he’d ever done.
But the fact was, he really had no desire to see this boy whose behavior had long ago isolated him from Myers’s affections. He suddenly, and with great clarity, recalled the boy’s face when he had lunged that time, and a wave of bitterness passed over Myers. . . . Why on earth, Myers asked himself, would he come all this way to see someone he disliked? He didn’t want to shake the boy’s hand, the hand of his enemy. (398)

It is not until the landscape outside reflects what Myers is struggling with that he is able to face his passionate enmity towards his son. The urban landscape serves as a reflection of the change Myers is undergoing. The urban setting represents everything Myers’ despises, and, interestingly, his son is settled in that urban landscape.

Myers’ “realization” represents what David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips call “Carver’s chosen task”: “to convey through the most fitting language and symbols the special moments when these people have sudden, astonishing glimpses behind the curtain which separates their empty lives from chaos” (76). As well, it relates to Scofield’s argument because what exists behind the curtain of the contextual landscape of “The Compartment” is Myers’ complex bizarreness. As Myers’ gaze of the landscape outside the train’s compartment shifts to match his landscape behind the curtain, he “become[s a voyeur of his] own experience” (Boxer and Phillips 76). Pointedly, Boxer and Phillips redefine voyeurism in the context of actions by Carver’s characters: “voyeurism is used advisedly [. . .] to mean not just sexual spying, but the wistful identification with some distant, unattainable idea of self” (76). Myers’ realization arrives because he is a voyeur of his own life. Everything Myers gazes at is his form of taking action, for voyeurism is Myers’ way of internalizing his lived experiences. As he gazes out onto the urban landscape he identifies it with his true feelings about his son, while the rural landscapes highlight a disconnect within Myers which represents the “unattainable idea of self.”

Boxer and Phillips use the term “dissociation” to describe the kind of disconnection seen in Carver’s characters, that is, as “a sense of disengagement from one’s own identity and life, a state of standing apart from whatever defines the self, or of being unselled” (75). The urban landscape represents Myers true passions about his son. All previous pleasant pastoral landscapes represent Myers as “standing apart from” himself; for that reason, Myers daydreams of living within one of the old farming complexes surrounded by a wall. Myers has dissociated himself from himself and the thing that drove Myers to continue to dissociate his internal feelings about his son, and what caused him to take this trip in the first place, was the word “Love” in a letter he received from the “boy” several months previously [emphasis in the original] (Carver 395). Myers’ son ending the letter with
the word “Love” causes Myers to further mollify the repulsion he has for his son. Kirk Nesset discusses how Carver’s use of love is as “a darkly unknowable and irreversible force, a form of sickness not only complicating but dominating the lives of characters” (293). In “The Compartment,” Carver uses the word “love” to complicate Myers’ negative pastoral. Eventually, Myers sheds that dissociation, eventually confronting his enmity for his son that is reflected in an urban contextual landscape. This realization leads to Myers feeling at peace with himself, though in the bizarre way wherein passions become, according to Scofield’s concept of the negative pastoral, “twisted into strange and contorted expression.” When the train comes to a complete stop in the Strasbourg train station, Myers watches domestic behaviors taking place on the train platform. Ironically, these domestic behaviors appear to bring him peace even though they are the actions he avoids with his own son. This act of Myers finding peace in watching everyday events resembles what Carver termed “‘dis-ease’”: “a certain terrible kind of domesticity” (Nesset 292). Even though this act of gazing out of his train’s compartment is a normal human behavior, it is actually dis-ease that results from the negative pastoral, for Myers finds these domestic behaviors as a bizarre balm that helps solidify his decision not to see his estranged son.

Myers is not presented as a very loving father, for his relationship with his son is shown to include a physical altercation, distancing himself over time from his son, and then deciding not to meet his son despite arranging to do so. It is ironic, then, that Myers finds comfort in watching the very acts of others which he himself physically avoids: “These days he lived alone and had little to do with anybody outside of his work” (Carver 393). Interestingly, Nesset describes Carver’s writing as a road to recovery: “the road to recovery is part of the journey . . . the remedy for such dis-ease lies in its cause” (310). Therefore, “the remedy” for Myers is this urban landscape his son lives in, one in which a voyeuristic character who lives vicariously through what he sees uses an urban contextual landscape to bring about peace with his bizarre “dis-ease.” Furthermore, Myers’ watching the loving domestic behaviors on the train station highlights how the word “love” dissociated Myers from his diseasing “negative pastoral.” Carver had his own character read the letter without observing love-like behaviors in a contextual landscape. Since Myers is a voyeur of his life, his observing loving notions outside his train compartment helps confirm the love-like dissociation and push him towards a personal realization.

In “Faces in the Mirror: Raymond Carver and the Intricacies of Looking,” Christof Decker identifies three types of gazes that Carver’s characters exhibit: “narcissistic, televisual, and
cinematic.” The “narcissistic gaze” represents a form of introspection, the televisual gaze signifies looking out at the (mediated) world, while the cinematic gaze establishes a (self-reflexive) form of looking which acknowledges the observer as a participant in a narrative sequence” (43). During the course of “The Compartment,” Myers is engaged in “televisual gaze;” that is, except for a couple of scenes, he is always “looking out at the (mediated) world.” However, while there is a constant state of the “televisual gaze” in the background, there is an evolution of the “narcissistic gaze” to the “cinematic gaze” over the course of the story.

At the beginning of the story the first contextual landscapes are typical rural pastoral landscapes. As Myers is looking at those “mediated” rural landscapes, he also participates in a form of “narcissistic introspection.” What confirms this notion is when Myers is reminiscing about the last time he saw his son, and in attempts to ignore that “old anger,” he imagines himself being happy in an old farmhouse. This is narcissistic behavior instead of a “cinematic” behavior because Myers is attempting to make himself feel better about being a distant and unloving father. This is a “form of introspection,” however, it allows Carver to show that Myers is not yet an active “participant in a narrative sequence.” Rather, it shows Myers as a character who is dissociated from the beginning “narrative sequence” because he has yet to accept his dis-easing “negative pastoral.” What Carver is highlighting in the beginning of the story is that Myers doesn’t belong in that train compartment heading to see his son. Paradoxically, though, it becomes necessary that Myers remains in the train compartment in order to accept who he is.

When the train slows and Myers’ anger is boiling over, it is then we see this evolution of Myers moving from a “narcissistic gaze” to a “cinematic gaze” in this mediated world Carver has brought to life. The rural landscape shifts to a hateful and unwelcoming urban landscape that matches Myers’ “negative pastoral.” What this highlights is Carver’s making Myers an active “participant in a narrative sequence” via Myers’ negative pastoral matching the contextual pastoral. Therefore, after Myers chooses not to get off the train and see his son, and after Myers accepts the fact that he cannot let go of his enmity for his only son, we see him gazing out the compartment—while attempting to hide himself—and observing people embracing and kissing. Oddly, it is as if Myers is supposed to be there actively observing these domestic behaviors he despises and which simultaneously fill him with peace. The Strasbourg train station shows Myers cinematically gazing out onto a mediated world that confirms the peculiar peace he is starting to feel within himself.
Decker argues that there are two crucial aspects regarding how Carver’s characters gaze out at the world:

Firstly, gazing invites a consideration of place and self. It revolves around the issue of how the observer fits into the scene he or she is watching (and describing). Secondly, it is presented as an activity creating a special bond between the observer and the person or object looked at. (43)

As Myers sits in his train compartment cinematically gazing out at the Strasbourg train station, where no internal or external dialogue is provided, readers recognize this as a dis-easing experience because it is unsettling how peaceful Myers seems to be with his decision not to see his son, yet at the same time it is a relief that he has overcome his internal struggle. Critic Charles May describes experience as seen through the stories of Carver’s short fiction “in such a way that the truth is embodied rather than explained” (“Do You See” 40). As the train comes to a complete stop, Myers sets his briefcase down “and inch[e]s down in his seat” because he is worried what he might do if his son sees him and because he is “afraid he might shake his fist” at the boy (399). Once the other passenger leaves the train’s compartment, most likely with his son’s watch, Myers returns his gaze to the Strasbourg platform:

looking out the train window again . . . He saw a man in an apron standing in the door of the station, smoking a cigarette. The man was watching two trainmen explaining something to a woman in a long skirt who held a baby in her arms. The woman listened and then nodded and listened some more . . . One of the men chucked the baby under its chin. The woman looked down and smiled . . . Myers saw a young couple embracing on the platform a little distance from his car. (401)

As Myers gazes upon these particular people and their accompanying domestic behaviors, readers can recognize the embodied dis-easing truth of what Myers is experiencing.

What Myers looks out upon are very pleasant, happy, and loving moments. While Myers does not articulate what constitutes or describes the emotion of happiness, Carver’s lyric-narrative poem “Happiness” describes Carver himself looking out his window on an early morning with his coffee, watching two boys deliver newspapers. At the end of the poem Carver experiences a wave of happiness that can not really be explained, though as the speaker in the poem, he articulates that:

“Such beauty that for a minute / death and ambition, even love / doesn’t enter into this. / Happiness. It comes on / unexpectedly. And goes beyond, really, / any early morning talk about it”
(L. 19-24). In this poem Carver participates in a “cinematic gaze” and then articulates what he experiences, similar to what Myers does while gazing cinematically at the urban landscape of Strasbourg and the train station; however, reader are the ones left to articulate what Myers is embodying. After Myers has had his moment of clarity, which is not articulated but simply embodied, he scrunches down in his seat and voyeuristically gazes out at the cinema before him. This contextual landscape reflects Myers cinematic participation, experiencing a tranquil moment after coming to grips with the fact that he is a terrible domestic kind of father. By using landscapes to show the evolving movement towards Myers’ dis-easing passion, Carver gives the readers an embodied experience that is concurrently dark and beautiful; it is dark because Myers is abandoning his only child and taking away that chance of reconciliation—a potential healing, and beautiful because for the first time in the story Myers is at some sort of peace with himself. Decker writes “What the characters are looking at, how their look is qualified, and how it affects their (self-) knowledge becomes vitally important against the background of a pervasive feeling of speechlessness” (43). As mentioned earlier, Decker describes a crucial aspect of how Carver’s characters’ gaze “revolves around the issue of how the observer fits into the scene he or she is watching” (43). After realizing his dis-easing quality via the changing contextual landscapes, Carver has Myers internalizing happy and loving domestic behaviors from the people at the train station. This renders the reader speechless, and Myers speechless, because Myers’ realization represents both a terrible apprehension of what it means to be a distant and unloving father, and a bizarre feeling of peace.

Myers accomplishes the act of deciding to not see his son without conversation. Many of Carver’s short stories demonstrate how language often falls short of being able to capture emotion, a trait often associated with minimalism. Bramlett and Raabe write that the unnamed narrator in Carver’s story “Intimacy” “seeks something beyond the power of language to convey emotion . . . ‘No ideas but in things’” (185). Such moments of conversation that take place in “The Compartment” are not even conversations, they are instead necessary statements of trying to get information, materials, greetings, pardons, and Myers attempting to find who stole his boy’s watch. Carver, as readers notice, uses various landscapes to bring out the emotive experiences of Myers throughout the story. Myers’ “speechlessness” is embodied and conveyed to and for the reader by how Carver uses the landscapes Myers gazes out upon; the things Myers looks at represent
everything he is trying to seek “beyond the power of language”: a reconciliation with his own “‘dis-
ease’” that makes him who he is.

It is not so much Myers seeking the love a parent has for their child nor the love of a lover, but rather an acceptance of one’s true self. Using a term from May’s “Chekhov and the Modern Short Story,” Carver “apprehends” Myers’ paternal failure and acceptance via the impressionistic landscapes and lack of conversations that exist in “The Compartment,” that is, “a basic impressionistic apprehension of reality itself as a function of perspectival point of view” (199). In the final scene where Myers has accidentally been “uncoupled” from his original train compartment and enters a completely different train compartment full of “small, dark-skinned men who spoke rapidly in a language Myers had never heard before,” he falls asleep (401).

This is significant because sleep has been a struggle throughout the story for Myers. His mind will not let him fall asleep until he comes to some kind of mindfulness about the emotional situation in which he has put himself. When Myers does fall asleep, it demonstrates two things. First, this story is about Myers’ struggle to reconcile with his own “‘dis-ease’” as a father who is distant and unloving regarding his only child. Second, conversations cannot be the device that reveal this “bizarre” reconciliation for Myers because this struggle is “beyond the power of language” (Bramlett and Raabe 185); this seems evident from the ways in which “The men went on talking and laughing. Their voices came to him as if from a distance. Soon the voices became part of the train’s movements—and gradually Myers felt himself being carried then pulled back, into sleep” (Carver 401). This new train compartment’s landscape is a cinematic scene where Myers seems at peace with himself as a result of his engagement with the negative pastoral that exists in a space between his bizarre anger and a negotiated peacefulness. As well, it is no use for Myers to attempt to understand where he is headed because he cannot understand anybody and no one can understand him—conversation is mute. At this moment, where Myers is surrounded by unfamiliar people, languages, and train compartments, he is tentatively a grounded participant in a contextualized landscape.
Works Cited


