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Saying More without Trying to Say More: On Gordon Lish Reshaping the Body of Raymond Carver and Saving Barry Hannah

MICHAEL HEMMINGSON

ABSTRACT: This article looks deeper into the Raymond Carver–Gordon Lish editing controversy than previous literature by comparing the published work to the edited manuscripts in Lish’s archived papers and further correspondence that has not been previously discussed. Carver was not the only writer whose work Lish did heavy editing for, as well as added his own dialogue and sentences to; he did the same with Barry Hannah’s mid-career books. A close study of Hannah’s manuscripts compared to the published product shows that Hannah was having difficulty shaping some of his work alone. The article argues that while Lish went beyond the normal scope of the editor’s job, both Carver and Hannah needed his collaboration while both writers were dealing with alcoholism, failed relationships, economic hardships, and the reality of commercial publishing. Without Lish championing both these writers, they may have not have published certain canonical works.

Keywords: Raymond Carver, Barry Hannah, Gordon Lish, editing, collaboration, minimalism, literary career

More on Carving Carver

In the past decade, there has been much ado, debate, and discourse about Gordon Lish’s editing, indeed, reshaping, the short stories of Raymond Carver. This article adds to the growing literature. The matter goes beyond

Carver, however. Lish did the same kind of heavy editing for other writers; this seems to be glossed over by critics, scholars, armchair commentators, and literary bloggers.¹ In the second section of this article, I will also examine Lish's editing of Barry Hannah's work, another major American fiction writer who wrote in the minimalist mode during the 1980s and 1990s. My argument has two parts: (1) based on evidence, Lish's role went beyond being a mere editor to being a collaborator with both Carver and Hannah; and (2) Carver and Hannah needed this from Lish, who helped the two writers create what are now canonical texts.

This will not be agreeable with those inside the Carver Camp: I contend that Carver owes his career to his editor (as does Hannah). I will suggest that he would have remained an obscure scribe of stories and poems relegated to the small literary journals he started out in. Without Lish as an advocate, championing Carver for publication in the slick pages of *Esquire* and secure book contracts for *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976) and *What We Talk About When We Talk about Love* (1981), Carver would most likely *not* have been noticed by the "mainstream" reading public. There are those who will argue that Carver would have eventually made his way through the mysterious warren of New York publishing via his own merits, but those who believe this have never had experience with the harsh realities of the commercial publishing industry and how books are distributed, reviewed, and placed in stores, something that small presses (like Capra, which published Carver's early volumes) do not have the requisite resources and connections to participate in adequately. I am not suggesting that the attention Carver received was not worthy—Carver deserved all the praise (and some of the condemnation) handed to him. The fact is, he was a short story writer only, and a part-time poet, without a novel under his belt; and despite all the impressive venues he published in during the 1960s and 1970s, for many years he could not find a home for *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*² He was told that there was not a viable market for short stories and that his work, despite the awards and accolades, was deemed too dark and pessimistic to attract a mainstream readership. McGraw-Hill was not, shall we say, "excited" to publish *Will You Please* and did so only from Lish's insistence through a short-lived imprint between Lish's editorial transition from *Esquire* to Knopf. When the collection was nominated for the National Book Award,³ McGraw-Hill looked at Carver with new eyes and gave him a contract for a novel he never delivered.⁴ In a 1982 interview in a small, obscure journal, *The Akros Review*, Carver acknowledges this yet does not refer to Lish by name, most likely because this was around the time Carver and Lish had their falling out:

I got a collection published because an editor was willing to go to the wall for the stories. He saw the stories and the manuscript and said, "We have to publish these." And they were published against serious objections from a few superiors. But they let him publish the stories. When the collection began to make them money, I became their fair-haired boy. They couldn't

say enough good things about the book and the editor. We were treated like the plague at the beginning. It can be squalid out there. It really can. (Pope and McElhinney 20)

This is an oft-heard story in commercial publishing when an underdog makes a splash. Still, Carver was a hard sell—could he do it again with a collection and no novel?—when Lish started his job at Knopf in late 1977; it is was four years before Carver had a book published there, although he certainly had the stories available. (In Lish’s archives, there is a note to Random House publisher Robert Gottlieb wherein Lish indicates that he knows Gottlieb does not care for Carver’s work but wishes to change the publisher’s mind.)

“The Carver Chronicles,” the now infamous 1998 D. T. Max article in the *New York Times Magazine*, revealed that inside the folders of Lish’s archived papers at the Lilly Library was proof that Carver may have not written his stories alone and that Lish reshaped the work into what are now canonical stories of 1980s American minimalism, and that many of the stylized epiphanies at the end of Carver’s work, imitated by scores of lesser writers in the 1980s, were actually added in via a felt-tip pen in Lish’s hand. Max writes that Lish

had been quietly telling friends that he played a crucial role in the creation of the early stories of Raymond Carver. The details varied from telling to telling, but the basic idea was that he had changed some of the stories so much that they were more his than Carver’s. No one quite knew what to make of these statements. (As the years passed, Lish became reluctant to discuss the subject. Maybe he was choosing silence over people’s doubts.) (34)

Max also recounts how Brian Evenson’s research article on these Carver manuscripts was blocked from publication by Tess Gallagher. (The Carver manuscripts she donated to the Ohio State University Library do not include any of Lish’s markings.)

While Max started this controversial ball rolling, given the wide readership of the *New York Times Magazine*, he was not the first to bring this matter to public attention. The first published mention is found in Carol Polsgrove’s *It Wasn’t Pretty, Folks, but Didn’t We Have Fun? Esquire in the Sixties* (1995). The book mostly concerns Howard Hayes taking over *Esquire* in the 1960s and reshaping what was once a gentlemen’s fashion magazine into an icon of progressive thought, politics, and literature. Lish was hired as fiction editor in 1967, based on the strengths of his short-lived but much talked-about literary journal, *Genesis West*, key connections, and fast talking.⁵ Polsgrove, a professor of journalism at Indiana University, where the Lilly Library is located, had access to Lish’s papers, and noted that Carver’s first story in *Esquire*, “Neighbors,” was

considerably different from the manuscript Lish had received. At *Esquire*, editors did not usually line-edit much, unless a story or article flirted with

legal danger or violated *Esquire's* restrictions on four-letter words or ran too long for the space available. There was none of that heavy interlining of manuscripts common of some other magazines. Lish was, in contrast, an aggressive editor; he went after manuscripts with firm confidence in his editorial hand. On several pages of the twelve-page manuscript, fewer than half of Carver's words were left standing. Close to half were cut on several other pages. Lish's cuts gave the story a dry, minimalist feel. Uncut, Carver's manuscript read a good deal more like an ordinary realistically rendered story. (241)

Little attention was given to this; it was an arcane fact, and Polsgrove's book did not catch the attention of Carver scholars. With Max's article, it was now out in the open, but how much did it matter? Readers still read and admired Carver—and re-read him; professors taught his work across the country in undergrad and grad classes, and students turned into fans who loaned the books to friends, creating more fans.⁶ Did this knowledge of Lish's editing bring down the house around Carver's legacy? Not in the least. If anything, more people re-read the stories, and several critical essays were published after Max's article addressing the issue.

Gunter Leyboldt's "Reconsidering Raymond Carver's 'Development'" is a close examination of the two versions of "So Much Water So Close to Home" (the other version is "The Bath" in *What We Talk About*), what he feels works and does not work in each; for the most part, he dismisses Lish's editorial authority and believes that other critics put too much importance on the fragile and little understood author–editor relationship. Leyboldt disagrees with A. O. Scott's "Looking for Raymond Carver" (a response to Max' article), which contends that there are two Carvers:

one [...] a genuine realist who excels in sympathetic accounts of America's underprivileged; the other (represented by the 1981 collection of stories *What We Talk About When We Talk about Love*) he caricatures as a cynical minimalist who indulges in the very literary "tricks" he denounced in his interviews, producing a type of fiction that is "not an antidote to the anti-realist, avant-garde impulse of the 1960s and 1970s of writers like John Barth and Donald Barthelme, but rather its most extreme expression" (59). According to Scott, therefore, only the realist Carver represents "the real Carver," while the other, we are told, was coerced into the minimalist fallacy by his unsympathetic editor. (318)

"The editorial hand of Gordon Lish fell most heavily," Scott writes about *What We Talk About*, "as Lish cut, rearranged, and rewrote freely, without regard for Carver's wishes or feelings" (58). Leyboldt believes Carver merely succumbed to what he felt was his editor's best decision—certainly the enormously favorable critical reaction and commercial success made Carver believe that perhaps his editor was right. Leyboldt sees two versions of one story in "So Much Water," each with its merits; he maintains that the "miniatures" (317) of *What We Talk About* are not a detriment to what they had been before the editorial pen began slashing:

“Scott assumes falsely that the stability of Carver’s realism, and thus the value of his work, stands in inverse proportion to his reduction of materials” (318).

Arthur M. Bethea discusses the matter in *Technique and Sensibility in the Fiction and Poetry of Raymond Carver* (2001), as does G. P. Lainsbury in *The Carver Chronotope* (2004). Bethea takes a much heavier view of Lish’s editing than Lainsbury; both acknowledge that Lish performed the role of collaborator more than editor. Bethea views this as a negative whereas Lainsbury is neutral, deeming it as a process between writers and editors that has its tradition in Maxwell Perkins with Fitzgerald/Wolfe, or Ezra Pound and T. S. Elliot (notably with “The Waste Land”). (Max notes that Fitzgerald did some heavy editing in the first section of Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, to prepare it for submission to Perkins, as well as the unfounded rumors that Fitzgerald may have added in his own words as well.) In *My New York Friends*, Michiko Miyamoto writes about spending time with Jay McInerney and Carver in 1983, observing that “Carver had fierce sense of loyalty, and he mentioned Lish’s name at every opportunity, repeating that he was grateful to him from the bottom of his heart” (Gentry and Stull 66).

The matter faded away and became fodder for gossip at literary parties and brief mentions in the footnotes of critical essays until the appearance of the October 17, 2007, *New York Times* article by Motoko Rich, “The Real Raymond Carver: Expansive or Minimal?” Rich reported that Tess Gallagher, Carver’s widow and executor of the Carver Estate, was seeking to publish the unedited version of *What We Talk About* and was meeting resistance from Knopf. The New York publishing community and the blogs once again became busy talking about what the literati were talking about and referring back to Max’s ten-year-old article. This was followed by the December 24/31, 2007, issue of *The New Yorker* that included a story, “Beginners,” the restored version of “What We Talk About When We Talk about Love,” along with correspondence between Carver and Lish excerpted from Lish’s papers. Online, *The New Yorker* published the story showing which sentences he rewrote or added, which sentences and paragraphs he deleted. Much debate occurred online among Carver fans as to which version was “better.” Opinion went both ways.

What is lacking in this previous literature is a closer examination of all of Lish’s edits; many single out such a story as “So Much Water,” “The Bath,” and “Beginners” without closely examining the edits in many other stories. This essay will fill in that deficit. (Between the writing and publication of said essay, Jonathan Cape published the *Beginners* manuscript in the United Kingdom, and *Beginners* is also included in the Library of America edition, *Raymond Carver: Collected Stories*. I accessed the original manuscript in Gordon Lish’s archives at the Lilly Library in March 2008; therefore, all page citations for the stories in *Beginners* are from the manuscript rather than the now published work.) The Carver manuscripts in Lish’s archives at the Lilly Library are undeniable evidence of Lish’s role in reshaping Carver’s work from 1970 to 1981, beginning

at Lish's tenure with *Esquire*. The correspondence published *The New Yorker* shows that Carver was not always against Lish's editing, and welcomed it at times. Polsgrove notes, "Carver accepted Lish's changes—publication in *Esquire* was, after all, a big break for him—and Lish would always get credit for discovering his work" (244). "Feel the stories are first class now," Carver writes about Lish's initial editing of early stories and confesses, "[T]ook about all yr changes," in a different letter ("Letters to an Editor" 95). In a letter dated December 12, 1970 (which is not in *The New Yorker*), Carver writes about his forthcoming work: "Other good stories coming in *Descant*, *Western Humanities*, and *Southwest* that I wish I'd had you look at beforehand." (Lish would edit these stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* at a later date.) In an undated letter in 1971, after Carver's first sale at *Esquire*, Carver writes: "I cd [could] about die when 'Neighbors' hits print." Being published in a slick, national magazine with an important reputation in the literary world was a milestone moment in Carver's budding career. "Neighbors" was followed by other placements, such as "Collectors" and "Are These Actual Miles?" (original title: "What Is It?") Carver submitted every new story he wrote to *Esquire* but not all of them found a home, as Lish sent them "upstairs" for purchase approval and received more "nos" than "yesses." What *Esquire* did not buy, Lish was instrumental in placing elsewhere, such as "Fat" in *Harper's Bazaar* (Lish even does editing on the galleys for that) and "So Much Water So Close to Home" in *Playgirl*.

With *Will You Please*, Lish's first act was to retitle many of the stories. "A Night Out" was changed to "Another Rose" and finally to "Night School." "Are You a Doctor?" was originally "You Will Come Again, Won't You?" Since Lish had been editing the stories most of the first half of the 1970s, when it came to the 1976 publication of the book, his edits were minor, which may be why Tess Gallagher has not expressed a desire to have that particular book restored. Still, the manuscripts show that Lish was changing beginnings and endings along the way. The title changes appear to be a collaborative effort—for instance, the two-page "Popular Mechanics" had the early manuscript title "A Separate Debate." Lish sends Carver a memo dated May 3, 1977:

At the close, before that wonderful line, bring it back to the stuff outside the house, a touch, evocative, a figure, but not too pointed. Two, get the photo back into it in a surreal way, maybe as a phrase attaching to that last line, maybe confusing child and image or something (to give the thing the weight and new light it needs); three, come up with a new title, like, man, one of your great titles. A question? Dunno. But something that says more without trying to say more. What's titled now is too smart, too stiff.

Carver replies on May 6, 1977:

It's better now, I think [...] Still not sure about the title; maybe "Are You Kidding?" or "Little Things Mean a Lot", etc. Hope I've pinned it down on that last page with the needed "light and weight" you spoke of. Anycase, mon frere, thanks as always for your good eye.

What We Talk about When We Talk About Love is at the center of the controversy. First, there are the titles. “Beginners” was changed to “What We Talk About.” “After the Denim” had the original title “If It Pleases You,” and Lish changed it to “Community Center” in manuscript, then to “After the Denim” in galleys. Lish wanted “Why Don’t You Dance?” titled as “I’m Going to Sit Down” but changed his mind, or perhaps Carver convinced him otherwise, as the original title was restored in galleys. “A Serious Talk” was “Pie,” and “Viewfinder” was “The Hill.” There is a draft of these stories, submitted by Amanda Urban at ICM⁷ to Knopf, with the proposed title, *So Much Water So Close to Home*. Later, Carver wanted it to be called *Beginners*.

“Why Don’t You Dance?” originally opened as follows: “When Max drank he began to sweat. Once, bending over papers he was sorting, drops of sweat rolled off his nose” (manuscript 1). Lish’s edited opening is “In the kitchen, he poured another drink and looked at the bedroom suite in his front yard” (*What We Talk About* 3). Lish also adds in a lot of “he said, she said” in the dialogue, not only with this story but with all of them (hence, that bit of stylization atypical of minimalism is indeed Lish’s preference, not Carver’s). “The Bath” is the most depleted of the stories. Manuscript pages 20–37 are completely x’ed out via pen, ending the story with these lines: “‘Have you forgotten about Scotty?’ the man said. And the man hung up” (manuscript 20). Published, the story ends as follows: “‘Scotty,’ the voice said. ‘It is about Scotty,’ the voice said. ‘It has to do with Scotty, yes.’” (*What We Talk About* 56). In the restored version, titled “A Small, Good Thing” (*Cathedral* 1983), the passage reads, “‘Scotty,’ the man’s voice said. ‘It’s about Scotty, yes. It has to do with Scotty, that problem. Have you forgotten about Scotty?’ the man said. Then he hung up” (75). The man calling is a baker who, drunk, has been harassing Ann, the mother, for not picking up a birthday cake because her son was hit by a car and is in a coma. The baker does not know this. This is a canonic story that many readers know well, and it was included as part of the movie, *Short Cuts*, directed by Robert Altman. Gone from “The Bath,” however, is the emotional scene at the hospital when Scotty dies, interactions with other patients and doctors, and Ann and her husband’s confrontation with the baker who has been leaving harassing messages, and how the baker feels guilty and eases their pain—finds a connection—by giving them bread fresh out of the oven:

“Smell this,” the baker said, breaking open a dark loaf. “It’s heavy bread, but rich.” They smelled it, and then he had them taste it [. . .] They listened to him. They ate what they could. They swallowed the dark bread [. . .] They talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of ending. (*What We Talk About* 89)

In this ending, all the anger in the story subsides, and the baker finds redemption for the insensitive things he did; the parents seem to ready themselves to accept the death of their child. In “The Bath,” however, we never learn Scotty’s fate

(although we can assume), and the baker remains a bad guy, a bitter self-centered drunk, without the redemption and empathy he has in the original. There is no emotional impact in “The Bath,” endemic in much of minimalism: we see the outside world, not the inner; the silences leave us wondering about emotions. “The Bath” and “A Small, Good Thing” are indeed two completely different stories, as Leypoldt insists. Carver states in an interview:

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 . . . 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. (McCaffery and Gregory, “An Interview with Raymond Carver” 102)

Note that Carver euphemistically refers to Lish’s editing as “messed around with [. . .] to highlight the qualities of menace” but does not say who did the “messaging around.”

“After the Denim” follows a retired couple, James and Edith Packer, to a community center bingo game where James’s routine reality is interrupted when a young, “hippie” couple park their van in his space. During bingo, the young couple is lucky, and James observes them closely, convinced they are cheating. Back home, James cannot get his mind off them and how he would like revenge; he tries to settle down by knitting. The manuscript is twenty-four pages long. Lish ends it at page 20 with two lines: “Then he set to work. Exactly where he left off.” The published ending is as follows: “Then he set to work—stitch after stitch—making believe he was waving like the man on the keel” (*What We Talk About* 78).⁸ In the deleted pages, James reflects on his hobby: “When he first stopped drinking he’d laughed at the suggestion he’d heard one night at AA from a middle-aged businessman who said he might want to look into needlework” (manuscript 21). Nowhere in the published version is there indication that James had a drinking problem and is now sober. As James knits, Carver provides background information:

Before the drinking had turned bad on him and he’d prayed to be able to stop, he’d prayed on occasions some years before that, after his youngest son had gone off to Vietnam to fly jet planes. He’d prayed off and on then, sometimes during the day if he thought about his son in connection with reading in the newspaper about the terrible place [. . .] He’d pray then, idly, like most men who are not religious pray. (manuscript 22)

An important dimension of James is missing from the deletion; in the published story he appears to be nothing more than a bitter curmudgeon, when in fact his

anger and issues with “hippies” stem from his worrying about his son fighting in Vietnam. He hates “the hippies” and the young couple that took his parking space and won at bingo because they represent the times—the early 1970s—and the counterculture that condemns soldiers forced to fight.

Carver has James meditate on the nature of father and sons in a long paragraph that is a bit much and could have been trimmed down rather than completely cut. James thinks about his son, then thinks about his own father and what kind of son he was. He remembers how his father, a drunkard, got into a car accident and died:

He'd prayed one entire night for his father, that he would recover from his automobile accident. But his father had died anyway. He'd been drunk and speeding and had hit a tree, and there was nothing that could be done that could save his life. (manuscript 24)

Pages are not deleted from “Gazebo” but a few paragraphs are—some that add important depth to the characters’ motivations. “Gazebo” is about a young couple, Duane and Holly, who run a motel somewhere in America and are dealing with Duane’s infidelity. Holly has caught him sleeping with the Spanish maid, Juanita. In the manuscript version, a second maid, Bobbi, walks in on Duane and Juanita, and then goes and tells Holly—“Why she would do such a thing I couldn’t understand then and still can’t. These women worked together, but they were not friends” (manuscript 6). He does not know this has happened but figures it out when “I heard her asking the employment agency for another maid” (manuscript 7). In the published version, it is not clear how Holly finds out; she just does. In the manuscript, when Bobbi tells Holly, Holly is not surprised, as if she had been suspecting it: “Holly knew” (manuscript 7). In the published version, Duane is passive about Holly’s antics as she paces about and threatens suicide; Carver’s version, however, has some physical violence: “I slapped her for the first time ever that night and then begged her forgiveness” (manuscript 7).

Holly’s recollections at the end are more detailed; in her monologue about the old couple in Yakima, she recalls small details, like Duane wearing cut-offs. These details could be important because it calls into question her *exact* memory. She always saw the old couple as being herself and Duane in the future, living a simple life. In the manuscript, he says, “But here we are in this awful town, a couple of people who drink too much; running a motel with a dirty old swimming pool in front of it” (manuscript 12). The story ends with the sentence, “In this, too, she was right” (*What We Talk About* 29), but in the galleys, there is a different last sentence that is marked out: “I pray without closing my eyes” (manuscript 13). Lish deleted the character in prayer, as he did with James praying in “After the Denim.”

Altered endings and beginnings are found in nearly every story from this collection. Published, “Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit” (originally “Where Is Every-

one?") is four pages; the manuscript is fifteen pages, so it should have been eight to ten pages published. In manuscript, the narrator's mother informs him that his wife, Cynthia (changed to Myra) is cheating on him with a guy she met in Alcoholics Anonymous; he knows this and tells his mother, "He's an alcoholic. He's like me" (manuscript 14). The published ending is as follows: "'Honey,' I said to Myra the night she came home. 'Let's hug awhile and then you fix us a nice supper.' / Myra said, 'Wash your hands'" (*What We Talk About* 20). He has forgiven her for being with another man; she is back "home" and he is pleased that they will go back to their routine; they hug and then *she* fixes dinner. As if speaking to a child, she tells him to wash his hands, and she too seems content to go back the way they once were, that familiarity of domestic comfort. Carver did not originally have the reconciliation; his narrator is alone at home while his wife is with the other man:

I lay there staring at the television. There were images of uniformed men on the screen, a low murmur, then tanks and a man using a flamethrower [...] I kept staring until I felt my eyes close. But I woke up with a start, the pajamas damp with sweat. A snowy light filled the room. There was a roaring come at me. The room clamored. I lay there. I did not move. (manuscript 15)

In "One More Thing," Lish originally handwrites the ending, "But then he couldn't think of it" (manuscript 6). The published sentence is slightly different: "But then he could not think what it could possibly be," when L. D. says, "I just want to say one more thing" (*What We Talk About* 159). Carver's original ending is as follows: "'Is this what love is, L.D.?' she said, fixing her eyes on him. Her eyes were terrible and deep, and he held them as long as he could" (manuscript 7).

The published ending of "A Serious Talk" (originally "Pie") reads, "He stepped around the pie in the driveway and got back into his car. He started the car put it into reverse. It was hard managing until he put the ashtray down" (*What We Talk About* 113). Carver's ending reads, "He walked around the pie in the drive and got into his car. He started the car and put it into reverse. He backed out into the street. Then he put the car in low gear and went forward" (manuscript 11). Lish, adding in the ashtray, puts more focus on the object than Carver did, as the ashtray represents what is left of the separated couple's failed marriage: "He picked up the ashtray. He held it by its edge. He posed with it like a man preparing to hurl the discus. / 'Please,' she said. 'That's our ashtray'" (112). She says "our ashtray," not "mine." Bringing the astray back in the published version hints at the possibility of the marriage still being salvageable, while in the manuscript he "went forward," which suggests that he has accepted the end and is moving on with his life.

"Sacks" is twenty-one manuscript pages and the published story is nine; pages and paragraphs are once again x'ed out. In Carver's ending, the narrator

loses his father's address—"after all, what could he expect from someone like me?" (manuscript 21)—while Lish writes in the ending about the Almond Roca gift and how his wife "needs it now even less" (*What We Talk About* 45). In "Viewfinder," Lish's edits focus more on the rock imagery than Carver does (perhaps to connect the rock motif with "Tell the Women We're Going"). Carver's ending reads, "'Again,' I called. I picked up another rock. I grinned. / 'Now!' I called" (manuscript 7). Lish's reads, "'I don't know,' I heard him shout. 'I don't do motion shots.' / 'Again!' I screamed, and took up another rock" (15). In "The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off"—originally "Dummy"—Carver starts, "My father was very nervous and disagreeable for a long time after Dummy's death, and I believe it somehow marked the end of a halcyon period of his life, too, for it wasn't much later that his health began to fail" (manuscript 1). Published, the passage reads, "I'll tell you what did my father in. The third thing was Dummy, that Dummy died. The first thing was Pearl Harbor. And the second thing was moving to my grandfather's farm" (89). These are Lish's words, not Carver's. The last two paragraphs in the published version are also Lish's words: "Is this what happens when a friend dies? Bad luck for the pals he left behind? / But as I said, Pearl Harbor and having to move back to his dad's place did not do my dad one bit of good, either" (103).

I could go on citing minutiae. Nevertheless, all this is undeniable proof of Lish engaging in more than just editing. In Hollywood, such revising would earn someone a cowriter's credit on a screenplay. When two authors work on a story or novel, this is the type of collaborative give-and-take that results in duo bylines. Lish did not demand that credit, and it is not the place of an editor to do so. Maryann Burk Carver, in her memoir *What It Used to Be Like* (2006), has suggested Lish took such an active editorial hand because he loved Carver's work so much that he wished he had written it.⁹

Will history be "rewritten" if *What We Talk About* is restored as *Beginners*, as Knopf editor Gary Fisketjon told the *New York Times*?¹⁰ I will suggest that this is unlikely; little "harm" to American literature's legacy was done when the restored versions of Kerouac's *On the Road* and Plath's *Ariel* were issued. Publishing both versions side by side, the way *The New Yorker* did with "Beginners" (online), will certainly prove educational to readers (and writers), illustrating how the author–editor relationship works, and possibly subduing all the myth and gossip surrounding the Carver–Lish exchange. Lish, as a powerful editor, felt he was creating a better book; Carver, while resistant, gave in. Had the book failed, he would have been vindicated in his position; the fact that the collection was a major success and put Carver in a better critical and financial position (and secured him a Guggenheim Fellowship and a tenure-track job at Syracuse University) was something Carver had to deal with internally, because he would never know if the unedited stories would have been as successful. (They certainly would not have earned him the "father of minimalism" label he loathed.)

Helping Hannah

The impressions of Lish's hand can be seen all over Barry Hannah's mid-career work. Just as readers notice a change in style and method in Carver's last collection, *Cathedral*, compared to his first and second collection, the work Hannah did after *Airships* (1978) is remarkably "minimalist" considering the "maximalist" sensibilities of his first two novels, *Geromino Rex* (1972)¹¹ and *Nightwatchmen* (1974). Hannah began working with Lish at *Esquire*, where he published many stories and an independent segment of *The Tennis Handsome* (1989), published years later by Knopf.

While *The Tennis Handsome* is shorter than his first two novels, Hannah's other two books with Knopf are barely over 100 pages. *Ray* is a novella, maybe 25,000 words in all, and *Captain Maximus* is an uneven volume that feels like it was thrown together from random uncollected works—in fact, based on the two boxes of Barry Hannah files in Lish's archives, this appears to be just the case. Like Carver, Hannah was embattled with alcohol issues that had a negative impact on his life, teaching career, family, and writing, creating a rift in the life cycle called "The Good Barry" and "The Bad Barry" years, just as Carver had "The Good Ray" and "The Bad Ray" years.¹¹ (What was it about Lish that boozed-up writers sought him out for editorial guidance, friendship, and collaboration? This is a subject for a separate article.) While Carver questioned and resisted some of Lish's editing, Hannah embraced it and was well aware that *Ray* was in such bad shape that Lish had to do what Maxwell Perkins did with Thomas Wolfe: taking sections and pages and mixing them around like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle to assemble a narrative that could be labeled a "novel."

The first title with Lish, the book that rescued Hannah's career after the dismal sales of *Nightwatchmen*, was *Airships*, winner of the Arnold Gingrich Short Fiction Award, sponsored by *Esquire*. Lish had previously edited some of the stories for *Esquire*. With the others, he did what he had done with Carver's *Will You Please*: he line-edited photocopies of the stories from the journals they had seen print in. Needless to say, *Airships* redeemed Hannah from the bad sales of his second novel; critics hailed him as a master of the short story (Carver taught *Airships* in his classes, and Hannah later taught Carver in his classes), and sales were profitable for Knopf.

Ray was another story. In a September 19, 1979, letter, Hannah tells Lish: "Here's the last and you are now Eisenhower about how to put this together and I'm just one of your hard-shooting captains on the left bottom." In a July 1, 1980, handwritten letter, Hannah writes, "*Ray* profits marvelously by your brilliant editing." The drafts of *Ray* in Lish's papers are, to be blunt, a confusing, sloppy mess. Aside from beer and alcohol stains, there are many typos and a random strangeness to the text, added-in pages, handwritten or typed; it looks as if Hannah was intoxicated when he was writing and, by his own admission in

interviews, he was. He occasionally breaks away from the storyline and seems to be addressing Lish about the book, as if writing a letter. In a “Chapter X” that never made the final book, Hannah writes, “Best editor around is Gordon Lish at Knopff [sic]. He really does give a shit” (manuscript 29). There is a short story version of *Ray*, eighteen pages long, with a number of edits and Lish adding the following three lines to the end: “Sister! Christians! Sabers, gentlemen, sabers!” These sentences are included in other drafts and in the published book. Hannah’s original ending, found on manuscript page 158 of the last draft, is as follows: “And if that ain’t enough, Private, I’ll do it again.” It does not end in a sex scene between the narrator and his girlfriend, Westy, the way the book does, with Lish’s last three sentences. So we see here that Lish, as he did with Carver, created for Hannah what is now a classic, quirky ending.

Most editors, certainly today, would not bother with a manuscript in such bad shape, but Lish believed in Hannah, and Knopf wanted a follow-up to *Airships*, preferably a novel. Tucked away in the drafts is a Knopf memo from Lish to Random House publisher Gottlieb, undated, stating (in effect) that although Hannah’s pages are in bad shape, he is “committed” to make something of them. It would seem that Knopf’s interest in Hannah’s continued career was strictly financial, as any commercial publisher’s is, regardless of the fact that based on the condition of *Ray*, Hannah was incapable of coming up with a novel without strong guidance and—yes—Lish’s collaboration.

In the second draft, Hannah starts the book with these two sentences: “Ray meets Westy at the fancy yellow restaurant. She’s looking pretty tried and older now.” Published, it reads, “Ray is thirty and was born of decent religious parents, I say” (*Ray* 3). Throughout the final text, certain stylistic marking as “says I,” “say I,” or dialogue that starts “Says she” (106) are handwritten additions by Lish. Attached to the second draft, Hannah includes an undated letter: “Please arrange best, Captain. That’s all your friend wishes to say on this one. This one was the honest intense book I ever wrote [sic]. Title should be either *Ray*, *A Man in His Thirties* or just *Ray*.” The professionally (clean) typewritten manuscript, derived and assembled from all the drafts, is 136 pages long; published, it is 111 pages as a small-trim hardback with large type, wide margins, and short, clipped chapters after the longer, twenty-four page first chapter.¹²

This little memoir about a zany doctor known as “Ray” was a surprise success and well-received. Middle-aged Ray is dating a woman in her forties, Westy, who will become his second wife but also has a precocious eighteen-year-old southern girl named Sister who apparently loves him and wants him to marry her.

I paid for Sister to go to the University of South Alabama in Mobile [. . .] But there was no way she could cut college, not even a semester of it. She fell in love with two different boys and they both dropped out too. Now she’s a waitress in Atlanta, making a lot on tops and using marijuana by the wagonload. I received a scrawled letter and five one-hundred dollar bills—

her college fee—and a lurid photograph of her in a skimpy waitress costume, receiving between her lips the huge member of a fat conventioneer [. . .] eyes shut with pleasure and mouth open like a murdered boar [. . .] It was clear she was involved in a filthy, lucrative industry. In a letter she wrote:

“Ray, I’m rich, but this ain’t me. There’s nobody to talk to and I’m turning into hate. Please come and marry me. This ain’t me.” (*Ray* 29)

Ray is filled with sex, drugs, morally questionable behavior (Ray provides drugs to patients who may not really need it, has anal sex with the teenage Sister, and sex with another woman while married to Westy), wrapped around memories of brutal violence, real and imagined. His recollections of Vietnam turn into scenes from the Civil War: “I live in so many centuries” (41). “I am losing myself in two centuries and two wars” (45). Sister is murdered by one of her many lovers (she claims to need sex four times a day, at minimum, with whatever man is around), who is also a physician named Doctor Catsro. Her father, Mr. Hooch, publishes a collection of his poetry: “He’s beaten the shit out of Shakespeare with his new ones” (96). Meanwhile, Ray continues to stumble through his life, happy-go-lucky: “Westy and I are hugging. The thrill goes all around the world. I seem to have made her pregnant. Westy is worried about having a retarded idiot at her age [. . .] But I want it, moron, imbecile, whatever’s in the cards” (57). The pregnancy is a false alarm. Their marriage seems to take a turn south, especially after he lapses into more curious memories about the old South, interacting with one “Commander Gordon” who does not draw his blade when the regiment’s general urges all the men to raise their sabers in unison, to boost courage and morale in the face of danger (108). Commander Gordon replies, “Sorry. I was thinking about my ex-wife. Brings you down. I know I’m going to die and that brings me down” (109). Gordon focuses on the battle and yells, “Sabers up!”; hence, the last sentences of the book.¹³

Hannah’s attitude about Lish’s editorial authority is far more accepting than Carver’s concerns over *What We Talk About*. In a letter dated March 29, 1982, Hannah writes regarding *The Tennis Handsome*: “By now I know you have it edited into a masterpiece, something that will shone high and bring even more nookery to me,” and in a letter dated July 19, 1982, he tells Lish, “I approve the (your) revised version [. . .] You have done a splendid job.” In an interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, Hannah states that the original manuscript was 450 pages and contracted with Lippencott, but publication was cancelled due to the failure of his second novel. The book was originally intended to be a nonfiction profile of a tennis star, but Hannah’s interest waned; he did not think his subject was very fascinating and wrote a fictional profile instead. After the success of *Airships* and *Ray*, Lish was able to acquire *The Tennis Handsome* and of course trimmed it down considerably. Note that Hannah does not state “your edits” but “revised version.” A “version” indicated not merely an edit job, but an adaptation, if you will, or alternate rendering of the typescript Hannah sent. A letter dated July 19, 1992, is much more telling:

You are a master, right on the button. I like the book, and I know it was a hell of a rough ruffled pasture to deal with. You have done the stroke—I laughed and cried a little and you have kept it in the aim of *Ray*, which is what indeed I want to push for. You also write well at the end, you bastard, and from now on I might sit here collecting the checks after just raving incoherently into a recorder cassette with enough lust and chemical in me to make the little slob at the grad schools piss on “The Wasteland,” your having done the main work.

Captain Maximus (1985) started off as a novel entitled *Maximum Ned*. Hannah worked on the book throughout 1982 while living in Missoula, Montana. On December 13, 1982, Hannah sent Lish several hundred typed pages of an unfinished *Maximum Ned*, stating he needed money (asking for \$30,000) because the IRS was attaching \$800 a month for back payments. “I want to be a giant literary man, al’s I want,” Hannah writes on February 7, 1983; “I have taken it to Max Ned to get there.”⁵

In a letter dated May 23, 1983, Hannah writes

Booze vacation finally got me three tickets, and I got trials for two tomorrow, plus a tax audit [. . .] so I can’t start my *Playboy* trip on the Harley yet even if they let me keep my driver’s license. Had to get a lawyer. Was arrested for drunken riding, son driving, from airport when I got back from a San Diego reading. This sounding like a Carver letter?

The comparisons between Carver and Hannah are too significant to ignore. “Christ the old thing about hard hard hard to write sober,” Hannah confesses in a February 5, 1984, letter. Both writers turned to their esteemed editor during the bad days and the good days—drunk and sober versions of each—to help shape their pages: Carver on the sentence and paragraph level, Hannah for entire manuscripts. Hannah worked for years on *Ned* but it never became the novel he talked and wrote about to everyone; the editing process started to whittle it down. (One manuscript version is eighty-nine pages.) Lish asked for three more stories to flesh it out. The book was four years in the making, “and even in my drinking and tranquillizer stage I did not freak,” Hannah states on August 29, 1984. In the end, the story of *Ned* was relegated to a nine-page story, “Ride, Fly, Penetrate, Loiter,” that Lish even continued to edit after it was published in *The Georgia Review*. Half of *Captain Maximus* is devoted to a novella, “Power and Light,” which was actually the treatment for a film that Robert Altman had commissioned from Hannah but never filmed¹³ (yet Altman wound up making a movie out of several of Carver’s works). The rest of the book comprises various short stories; one, “Fans,” was originally an article Hannah wrote for the *Atlanta Weekly*, “American Sportsmen.” At this point in Hannah’s career, the slim volume was received rather positively by critics and readers, and that was good for the now sober writer.

Hannah tells Lish on September 20, 1984, that Seymour Lawrence wants to sign him up, “badly.” Lawrence was a maverick publisher at Dutton (and later Houghton Mifflin) who created an imprint under his name and signed a handful of major authors such as Kurt Vonnegut and Richard Brautigan (later, Jim Harrison and Susan Minot), allowing them to write whatever they wished without editorial veto and with control of theme and style. This freedom was embraced by the writers Lawrence approached; the offer was too good to turn down. Lawrence offered Hannah a better deal than Knopf could for his next title, which in a September 28, 1984, letter Hannah states is a collection of “20 stories, 250 pages long,” titled *Never Die*. Hannah’s first book with Lawrence was not that collection, however, but *Hey, Jack!* (1987), another short novel in the vein of *Ray*, followed by the autobiographical *Boomerang* (1989) that is more memoir than fiction, and a postmodern western, *Never Die* (1991). While there is no exact indication that Lish edited these books, there is evidence in Lish’s papers that Lish at least saw early manuscripts that included versions of some, if not all, of the Lawrence titles. He may have done some initial work on them. Each is less than 30,000 words and have the similar minimalist sensibility and atmosphere found in *Ray* and *Captain Maximus*.

To make things short, I am in love and I am also a veteran of Korea, with the big guns pointing straight at me, never knowing when and if they would announce: You die. [...] Now I am in love with a woman I met at Jack’s café. The world is so small. (*Hey Jack!* 25)

“What if this is heaven?” I ask Horace Newcomb one night while we were riding around drinking beer. “What if all those who don’t drink beer will never know heaven, and this is it?” (*Boomerang* 22)

Pity, his southern side sometimes, taking over like that, but men became mean when it was ninety-five in the shade. Boredom arose on stilts, sweaty with vitriol. Less and less lung, less and less heart. (*Never Die* 26)

The relationship between Hannah and Lish did not go the way of Carver. Take this passage from *Boomerang*: “The horrible genius Gordon Lish does not even have a cat. He owes me thousands but he will always be the smart boy arranging for my lit prizes.” *Arranging* is a euphemistic term for *editing*, or even *collaborating*. Hannah did not hide the facts about the literary relationship. Without Lish’s editorial guidance, Hannah recent work is longer, richer, deeper, such as his collection, *Bats out of Hell* (1994), which is 400 pages; *High Lonesome* (1997) at 240 pages; and the novel, *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* (2001), at 320 pages.

Conclusion

My primary argument has been that Gordon Lish’s hegemony over both Carver and Hannah went beyond the editor’s role, and he was actually a silent cowriter

(perhaps the “man behind the curtain” of later twentieth-century American minimalism). The second part of my argument was that Carver and Hannah owe their careers, their place in the canon of American literature, to Lish. Lish brought Carver to the attention of the New York publishing world through *Esquire*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, McGraw-Hill, and Knopf; because Lish had to passionately defend publishing Carver and was met with initial resistance, it is unlikely Carver would have broken into the mainstream on his own; thus, he would have remained a minor literary author, a brief entry in the bibliographical reference books. Carver was very aware of these facts; look at what he says in a 1987 interview with Michael Schumacher in 1987, a year before his death:

He [Lish] was always a great advocate of my stories, at all times championing my work, even during the period when I was not writing [...] Gordon read my work on radio and at writers conferences and so forth. I don’t think I ever had a greater advocate for the work, when I needed it, than Gordon. (234–35)

As for Hannah, his career had taken a turn for the worst with the critical and financial failure of his second novel; Lish’s publishing *Airships*, and subsequently fashioning of a short novel out of the messy manuscript pages of *Ray*, put Hannah back in the “literary limelight.” Without Lish’s guidance, it is uncertain where Hannah’s career would have gone. He could have easily had a brief career as a young writer with a powerful first novel and a flop for a second, and nothing else. This has certainly happened to many writers, and still does.

“The rights and wrongs of the Carver business will take years to sort out and will become part of American literary history,” writes Gerald Howard in a Slate.com article, “I Was Gordon Lish’s Editor.” That history is now. Carver scholarship can no longer ignore Lish’s participation; close studies of the texts must now always account for what Lish deleted and added. Lainsbury points out, “It is now the established opinion that that Lish’s editorial tampering with Carver’s work constitutes an integral part of Carver’s writerly narrative of recovery and self-assertion rather than some sort of critical indictment” (146). This is the same for Hannah’s mid-career books. I suggest that Lish is not the editorial bully some have painted him as. He had a sincere passion for excellent fiction, or what he thought was superb; he did not single out Carver or Hannah but edited many writers in the same way, whether they were “names” or “unknowns.”¹⁵ He was doing his job, what he felt good editors should do: reshaping manuscripts to be presented to the public in their best possible form.

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NOTES

1. When the news came out that Tess Gallagher wanted to publish her late husband's work in original manuscript form, for weeks the Internet was abuzz with discussion, from blogs to forums to columns and editorials.

2. He was twice a finalist for the University of Iowa Press short fiction award; his not being chosen by the guest judges did not sit well with the director, who eventually offered Carver a short-term teaching job at Iowa.

3. Even with this important nomination, Carver was disillusioned to find that *Will You Please* sold only 5,000 copies in hardback. For a story collection, that is fairly decent, but Carver did not know about the harsh realities of true sales and bookstore "returns."

4. In various interviews, Carver admitted he wrote an outline for what appeared to be a commercial novel just to get the advance, money he needed, as he was often destitute. However, in letters written to Gordon Lish, archived in Lish's papers at the Lilly Library at Indiana University, Carver often remarks how he will start a novel soon, "next week," and acknowledging that he knows he needs to write a novel to improve his career. The author's bio for his chapbook of poetry, *Winter Insomnia*, reads, "Presently writing more poems and stories and a novel." The only fragment for a novel, *Augustine*, was published in the posthumous collection, *Call if You Need Me*. What were these other novels he may or may have not been working on? What a wealth of research those manuscripts would be, like the fabled first novel lost in Hemingway's vanished suitcase.

5. When Arnold Gingrich, then *Esquire's* editor-in-chief, asked what he would publish if given the job, Lish said, "The new fiction." When asked what he meant by that, Lish replied that he did not know precisely, only he would "surely find it."

6. I was first introduced to Carver in 1987 by a girlfriend who was taking a writing class with T. C. Boyle at USC.

7. ICM no longer handles the Carver estate, nor did the agency wish to handle Gallagher's goal of publishing a restored *What We Talk About*. The Wylie Agency now represents the estate's interests.

8. While Carver never sought restoration for this story commercially, it was published by Lord John Press as a limited edition chapbook in 1984 under its original title, "If It Pleases You."

9. Rudy Wilson, whose first novel *The Red Truck* (1987) was published at Knopf, wrote to the *Times* after the appearance of D. T. Max's article: "[Lish] took my novel to France for a month and mowed it down from 440 pages to a final 178. He said to me when it was done, 'I wish I could put my name on it.' I thought, 'You might as well.'" (38–39).

10. At the time of this writing, Random House's Library of America plans to publish *Beginners* in an omnibus edition of Carver's prose. That book could be out by the time this article is published or read in the future.

11. In his introduction to the omnibus edition of *Boomerang and Never Die* (1993), Rick Bass writes, "Much has been made of the bad Barry, the hostage to alcohol, rage, and despair. I know it's politically incorrect and often just a plain bad idea to pardon all but the most severe antics of the hard drinker with the dismissive wave—'Oh, that's just so-and-so'—but back when the bottle was kicking his (and everyone else's around him) ass, I and many others would hold out belief in him, knowing, as one of his readers, that he'd been burdened with a hugeness of talent and a hugeness of heart and perception that would crush any of the rest of us like a gundrop" (viii).

12. Chapter One was published as stand-alone story in *The Kenyon Review*, Fall 1980.

13. It seems obvious that Commander Gordon is based on Lish, since Lish composed the words that Gordon recites about sabers.

14. Hannah spent nearly a year in Malibu working on the treatment. In *Boomerang*, he writes, "When I worked with the kind and brilliant Robert Altman in his wooden mansion by the sea, I

was in a tower of Plexiglass with sea gulls flying around me and the Pacific rolling under the house like a white man's dram of peace" (21).

15. Polsgrove reveals that some writers pulled out of publishing with *Esquire* based on his editing of their manuscripts: "Doris Betts went through a lengthy analysis of his changes of one of her stories before she said she did not think they would do. [...] Rather than let Lish make the changes, she sold the story elsewhere for \$25, instead of the \$400 she might have reasonably expected from *Esquire*" (243). In a Paul Bowles historical story about Hercules, Lish changed it to the present about "someone named Paul, instead of taking place twenty-five centuries or more ago" (243). Bowles refused to publish the story that way.

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