

Books, 1991: 97. Cheever writes: "My life is very different from what he [Kerouac] describes. There is almost no point where our emotions and affairs correspond. I am most deeply and continuously involved in the love of my wife and children." Cheever goes on to imply that the Beats are creatures transfixed by the present moment: "If we do not imagine the future how can we believe it to exist?"

5 Thomas Merton, *No Man Is An Island*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955: 27.

6 See my "Profiles in Perplexed Responsibility" for a closer analysis of this tension. *Hiroshima University Studies in Language and Culture*, Vol. 5 (1994): 13–30.

7 Raymond Carver, "The Pheasant," in *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories*. New York: Random House, 1984: 165–171.

8 Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy and Awakening," in *Entre Nous: Thinking—of—the—Other*, trans. Michal B. Smith and Barbara Harshav. New York: Columbia Up, 1998: 82.

9 Richard Ford, "Good Raymond," *The New Yorker* 5 October 1998: 78.

10 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*: 134.

11 Raymond Carver, "Preservation," in *Cathedral*. New York: Random House, 1989: 35–46.

12 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*: 164: "Autochthony is at the same time an attribute of sovereignty and of submission; they are simultaneous In its deep—seated fear life attests this ever possible inversion of the body—master into body—slave, of health into sickness."

13 F. M. Cornford, *Before and After Socrates*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1932: 32.

14 Ortega y Gasset, "In Search of Goethe From Within," in *The Worlds of Existentialism: A Critical Reader*, ed. Maurice Friedman. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964: 121.

15 Emmanuel Levinas, "The I and the Totality," in *Entre—Nous: Thinking—of—the—Other*: 15.

16 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*: 185.

unphilosophical) working-class fiction of Raymond Carver. The birth of thought in Carver's story would be that moment when consciousness "establishes a relationship with an unassumed exteriority"—in this case, the bloody pheasant—and takes up a position that reflects on its responsibility to what is outside it. Conscience emerges.

Thought begins the very moment consciousness becomes consciousness of its particularity, that is to say, when it conceives of the exteriority, beyond its nature as a living being, that encloses it; when thought becomes conscious of itself and at the same time conscious of the exteriority that goes beyond its nature, when it becomes metaphysical. Thought establishes a relationship with an unassumed exteriority. As thinking being, man is the one for whom the exterior world exists. From now on, his so-called biological life, his strictly interior life, is illuminated by thought.<sup>15</sup>

After he kills the pheasant, the space of Gerald's thought is no longer absolute freedom—there is now the world of nature, other people, and so on. This is a space of accountability in which one can be accused of injustice and perhaps even learn from one's mistakes. The "open road" of dogmatic freedom now takes on the contours of civilization, whose multiplicity necessitates complex issues of justice and hence *difficult freedom*. "Morality begins," Levinas says, "when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent."<sup>16</sup>

#### Notes

1 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne Up, 1969: 84.

2 Jack Kerouac, *On the Road: Text and Criticism*. Edited by Scott Donaldson. New York: Viking—Penguin Books, 1979: 3.

3 Steve Turner, *Angelheaded Hipster: A Life of Jack Kerouac*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1996: 203.

4 John Cheever, *The Journals of John Cheever*. New York: Ballantine

rather than increase in conflict and existential tension. It was never the case to begin with that Kerouac sought out intellectual opposition and conflict. The path of Beat freedom, at least for Kerouac, was always the path of least resistance. In this regard there is no hypocrisy and contradiction to be found between his road life and suburban domesticity: both forms of life are paths of least resistance.

Carver discovered Kerouac's unheroic existential truth for himself: the road to freedom can also be the path of least resistance. It is this truth, half - thought, half - felt, that percolates through Gerald's crepuscular boredom and provokes his backlash against his own nihilism. The roads ahead could only become visible as a challenge after Gerald realized that "he no longer had any values." To be sure, such a realization hardly makes it easier to abandon security. When all you want is security because you never had it, and suddenly you get that security, you can at first even justify your new lifestyle as an achievement of the lean and hungry existence which preceded it in one's days of striving. Until boredom, or worse, violence, sets in and becomes the climate of being. This is when one has become so mired in oneself, in one's atrophied instincts, as to become violently claustrophobic—what Levinas calls being *exiled in oneself*. Hasn't America become this way, sort of exiled, upholding its individuals' rights to bear arms as world opinion increasingly condemns gun ownership and the culture of violence spread through film and terrorist smuggling? People wonder when America will become less naive and develop a globally integrated conscience. Can individual security—hardly guaranteed by gun ownership in any case—be maintained at the price of injustice?

### Difficult Freedom

By suggesting an allegory of America's dogmatic freedom alienating it from the global community even as it strengthens its grip as the only superpower, the present study has hopefully stimulated critical inquiry and not sidetracked it from the worthwhile business of linking the ethical thought of Levinas with the so-called "minimalist" (i.e.,

behind. This scene, as if staged for performance, with Gerald's talents wearily showcased in a tasteless domestic quarrel, has an audience of onlookers in a diner. The slap brings some sobriety to the situation. Gerald says to Shirley, "I'm going to try and get my life in order. For one thing, find a job, a real job. Just not see anybody for a while." This seems indefinite, to say the least. But his mood is changing. "He was suddenly tired through to his bones, but he felt high too and on the edge of something." Gerald's newfound resolve may, however, only be part of a cycle he has repeated: that of falling into dependency relationships and then, when they sour or merely die out, promising to change his ways and become more responsible. No doubt it will prove easier to leave Shirley than his own Beat character and habits behind as he heads down the road once more. "He didn't look back" note the onlookers in the restaurant.

### The Path of Least Resistance

It has been uncomfortable even for diehard Kerouac fans to explain the seeming discontinuity between his famous road saga and the final domesticity which he sought in his mother's umbrage and a late, seemingly preposterous marriage—as if these late developments unmasked the totality of Kerouac's career as hypocritical. After all, one could not possibly mistake the vast changing landscape that Kerouac's Beathood had once been for the static housebound man he became. That is like comparing something wild and mutable with something merely suburban—it is like comparing Kerouac with Cheever. It might be argued that in terms of lifestyle there is an absolute separation between the road life and home life. This would mean that Beathood was something episodic or ephemeral, based entirely in inspiration. While it was roadbound, Beathood existed; when Kerouac disembarked, it ended. There was no failure: to speak of failure is to presume that inspiration is continuous, like a philosophy or historical narrative. But this episodic explanation of Beathood misses the inner passivity common to its philosophical inconsistencies, i.e., Kerouac's longstanding preference for a decrease

forever trying to find themselves, the brooding,  
introspective bit. (168)

Fed up with the lack of results issuing from his indirect line of questioning, Gerald finally gets to the heart of the matter: "What would you say if I told you I killed that pheasant intentionally? That I tried to hit it?"

She gazed at him for a minute without any interest. She didn't say anything. Something became clear to him then. Partly, he supposed later, it was a result of the look of bored indifference she turned on him, and partly it was a consequence of his own state of mind. But he suddenly understood that he no longer had any values. No frame of reference, was the phrase that ran through his mind. (169)

Without values and a practical framework (e.g., community) to support and legitimate them, Gerald has been adrift in nihilism. Everything has become permissible, including murder. Permissibility is to a great extent the license of youth. As Ortega y Gasset says, a young person can try many roles and not feel constrained to stay with one of them. A young person is available. But adult life—responsible personhood with a sense of destiny—has limits, the more so as one ages.<sup>14</sup> One is no longer so available; one is supposed to be *somewhere* doing *something*, in the service of one's vocation and loved ones. In this sense Beathood, whose symbol is the open road, is a movement of perennial youth. Gerald would be someone who is trying to leave Beathood behind, to sober up, realize a sense of purpose. In the final scene that takes place in the parking lot of a roadside restaurant, the dimness of light, the obscurity of sensibility that had marked Gerald's self-absorption in a world of material comfort and boozy gesticulation, gives way to a sense of initiative. When Shirley tells him to "do something," he replies "I'll think of something."

Shirley slaps Gerald's face before taking her car and leaving him

Shirley deflects his question as a nuisance. She seems to have no idea what he is talking about. In this regard she fails to help him become concretely accountable for his actions. He is left on his own to dimly grope towards a moral level of thought. But Gerald persists in his inquiry. He has to repeat his question:

"We're just talking. I just asked you how well you knew me. Would I"—how should I put it—"am I trustworthy, for instance? Do you trust me?" It wasn't clear to him what he was asking, but he felt on the edge of something. (167)

In this passage Gerald interrupts himself. Would I ...changes to am I. Was he going to ask: "Would I kill deliberately? Am I capable of murder?" Gerald is on the edge of thought—philosophy is being born. For he is pursuing, in his muddled manner, *knowledge of himself and the right way to live*, the fundamental questions of which Socrates never grew weary.<sup>13</sup>

Gerald wants to know: Who am I? What is my identity? How do others perceive me? Am I trustworthy? But these seem like the wrong questions to ask in an atmosphere that has become refractory to thought. Gerald's line of inquiry leads only to tedium for Shirley, and she asks him, "Is it important?" to which he replies, shrugging, "If you don't think it is, then I guess it isn't."

Gerald continues to ask questions in spite of Shirley's obvious indifference. "Let me ask you this then," he says. "Do you think I'd act, that I'd ever do something against my own best interests?" Shirley tells him that he would do so, and then asks him not to ask any more questions:

She smoked her cigarette and stared out the window. She wondered if she should spend the energy to change the subject. But she was becoming irritated too. She was sick of this whole thing. It was too bad she'd agreed to come with him. She should've stayed in Hollywood. She didn't like people who were

### Nihilism and Self—Interrogation

In Gerald's stupor of self-satisfaction anything has become permissible, and it is his tacit acceptance of this immorality which he challenges by killing the pheasant. Gerald has been following the path of least resistance, but now he has run up against something alive and totally other that awakens his sense of astonishment at himself, at his delinquency. Gerald has purposely killed the bird, but his reason is obscure—perhaps subconsciously as a last resort to interrogate his own motives, or lack thereof. Only following such an interrogation can he attempt to free himself not so much from Shirley as from the self he has been (or not become) with Shirley, to whom Shirley had been an accomplice. Shirley could be considered an accomplice in the killing—after all, she was not paying attention—but Gerald's concern is with his own self-responsibility.

The destruction of the bird is an opportunity for thought. The pheasant's death, however minor in the scheme of things, represents a break with the order of passive time in which Gerald has been floating, his amnesia concerning his destiny. His original destination on this trip, to Shirley's Carmel beachhouse, will be rerouted. It is as if he has been sleepwalking and suddenly wakes up to find himself walking in a ridiculous or dangerous direction. He has to find his bearings before proceeding on his way. But he has not thought (been awake, sober) for so long that he has no idea where to begin. His awakening seems to begin with the uneasy spectacle of the bird's blood. As they get back on the road and continue their trip, Gerald poses a question to Shirley:

"How well do you really know me?"

"What do you mean? she said. She let the radio alone for a minute and leaned back against the seat.

"I just said, How well do you know me?"

"I don't have any idea what you mean?"

He said, "Just how well do you know me? That's all I'm asking."

"Why do you ask me that at this time of the morning?" (167)

tions. Connections were more important than money. But money and connections both—that was unbeatable. (168).

The distance covered by the car somehow gulps up or displaces the necessity to speak; but the silence is haunted by their escape from the disingenuous domesticity into which their life together had fallen back at the main house, and which will greet them again should they reach Shirley's beach house. Fleeing their relationship by taking a drive, they are pressed closer together by the car interior. Gerald neither wants to think about this personal situation, or what will follow it in terms of his change in life style. He may well need to think, but he has become practiced at avoiding thought, especially thought of change or thought that will commit him to some effort. As we will see, Shirley doesn't like philosophical men—the brooding type. It will take something other than Gerald's predicament with Shirley to provoke him to thought, and change. If he is tired at all, he is tired of avoiding thought, which is a habit his life with Shirley has encouraged.

Suddenly a pheasant appears to Gerald in the corner of his eye, crossing the road. Gerald had been decreasing his speed before seeing the wild bird, but he now increases his speed and tightens his grip on the wheel to deliberately strike the pheasant. "Oh my God," he says, "appalled at what he had done" (166). Gerald gets out of the car to investigate the damage and check the pheasant. There is blood on his dented front fender, and one headlight is broken. "He couldn't bring himself to touch it, but he looked at it for a minute; crumpled, its eyes open, a bright spot of blood on its beak." In an acutely telling detail Carver says that Shirley stays half-asleep through the killing and subsequent examination. When Gerald points out what has happened, Shirley's response is diffident; she says she has a headache, then quickly attends to her visage in the rearview mirror. For her the circle will remain unbroken—the sphere of self-sameness or bored narcissism. In a moment we will need to look more closely at their separate responses to the bird's death.



Shirley clearly has little respect for him. And the feeling is mutual. Although she freshens her self-image by keeping Gerald around, he sees her at face value, more or less a wreck, devoid of glamour but for her money:

He took his eyes off the road. She didn't look asleep, she looked unconscious, or seriously injured—as if she'd fallen out of a building. She lay twisted in the seat, one leg doubled under and the other hanging over the seat almost to the floor. The skirt was pulled above her thighs, exposing the tops of the nylons, the garter belt, and the flesh between. Her head lay on the arm rest and her mouth was open. (165—166)

This is not a tender glance, but a sort of perceptual indiscretion, exposing the wanton element in Shirley's character. Gerald's observation evinces no emotional nuances, no sentiments: Shirley is seen entirely in her materiality, as a heap of disheveled flesh. Likewise, as we saw earlier, he is merely an object of investment for her, one that has turned out poorly.

As Gerald drives, the physical act of steering pleases him. "He was glad to be doing something. It felt good to sit there behind the wheel, driving, not having to think" (166). Driving is a manly way to take charge without effort. Relieved of the weight of his own acts under Shirley's patronage, Gerald apparently regains his will in the superficial concreteness of the steering wheel. Anything to deflect thought. Like Shirley, he feels a growing conviction that their relationship is coming to an end:

At least in the beginning there'd been some affection. They had began living together because she had suggested it for one thing, and because at the time he's met her, at the party of a friend in a Pacific Palisades apartment, he'd wanted the kind of life he imagined she could give him. She had money and she had connec-

on the sofa. His behavior is largely inscrutable. Somehow he is content to sit around, and expresses no urgency; yet is he clearly disconsolate as well, very much aware that it is his wife's salary that keeps a roof over his head and supper on the table. But unlike Shirley, Sandy evinces patience and seeks to preserve their household even while things fall apart during her husband's semi-bewildered indolence. The difference is that Shirley is a hedonist, like Gerald, and has lost interest in him because she thinks he is no longer pleasurable to be with.

As Gerald drives next to Shirley there is a lugubrious torpor between them, as if being satisfied leads to boredom. The cornucopia has lasted for three years and ended up as mute contentment. "In enjoyment I am absolutely for myself," Levinas says. "Egoist without reference to the Other, I am alone without solitude, innocently egoist and alone... entirely deaf to the Other, outside of all communication and all refusal to communicate—without ears, like a hungry stomach." Yet the self—enclosure of satiety is not the same as sovereignty. Gerald knows the cornucopia has not been of his making. Supplied by Shirley, the goods have kept Gerald submissive; he should not bite the hand that feeds him. In such circumstances, resentment towards one's dependence compounds with self-loathing. The healthy feeling of contentment inverts into sickness.<sup>12</sup>

### From Whim to Violent Impulse

The road trip began as a whim; they had been drinking martinis and Gerald suggested they drive to her beach house:

"Why not?" she said, stirring the drink with her finger and looking at him where he stood against the balcony railing. "Let's. I think it's the best idea you've had all week," licking the gin off her finger. (165)

There is a strained air of decadence here that Carver describes without wasting a syllable. A whimsical gin-inspired plan to drive in the middle of the night is the best idea Gerald has had all week.

concession to the hedonism of the Beat lifestyle that a more stringent moralist like Cheever cannot condone without guilt. Eating, drinking, fishing, basking in the sun by a pool or river—these are activities without a goal; it is enough to be stimulated by them. How can we condemn or morally qualify the natural riches with which we find ourselves surrounded from birth? Levinas remarks that there is a permanent truth in hedonism: the disinterested joy of play in which goal-directed or utilitarian motives are suspended for the sake of enjoyment. "It is carelessness with regard to existence, which has a positive meaning: it consists in sinking one's teeth into the nutriments of the world, agreeing to the world as wealth, releasing its elemental essence...the need for food does not have existence as its goal, but food."<sup>10</sup> It follows that a devoted fisherman like Carver enjoys fishing for its own sake, immersed in the landscape of fishing where, he says in a poem, "water comes together with other water."

### Egotism and Inanition

But in "Carver country" a cornucopia can hardly be taken for granted. As if to remind himself of just how tenuous his self-satisfied existence is, Gerald remarks that the scenery along the road is "something out of Steinbeck." Make a mistake, lose your muse or Lady Luck, and just around the bend will appear conditions reminiscent of the Dustbowl years of the Great Depression. This is precisely what creates the tension in Gerald's thought. On the one hand, he secretly appreciates the lucky span of contentment that being Shirley's kept man has brought him; but on the other hand, he is disheartened by his inanition and lack of self-direction.

This mood of inertia also infects Sandy's unemployed husband in Carver's story "Preservation."<sup>11</sup> Sandy's husband remains nameless. His namelessness suggests that Carver is entirely preoccupied with capturing a man's fallen mood and the atmosphere of semi-bewilderment it creates. This kind of atrophied sensibility is something Carver's work has distinguished itself in depicting. To some extent, Sandy shares Shirley's frustration: what is this man thinking? Her husband spends most of his days reading the newspaper

in as the story opens is pensively vacant, unfocused. As beings primarily absorbed in their own satiety and, in Shirley's case, vanity, neither Gerald nor Shirley call each other to accountability. They live in the present as if it were some exotic place, but without any links to the future it becomes *nowhere*. Gerald is sort of mesmerized by his self-preservation, yet something bothers him. Shirley finds his pensiveness irritating. Such beings, unencumbered by any refined spiritual compunction or conscience as we find for example in Cheever's people, seem to embody the "animal faith" of which Santayana spoke. And yet as we said, something is troubling Gerald. He is about to turn thirty years old and feels "at loose ends."

### A Kept Man Waxes Fat

A recent graduate of a drama program in Los Angeles, Gerald is an aspiring actor who, like so many others in that area, plays minor roles while waiting for the big break. He had lately taken up an easy role sitting poolside, a drink in hand, his youth being a fountain for Shirley flattery when her aging friends from Hollywood strut by and admire him. Shirley apparently has friends in the film industry that can help Gerald's career. But this passive situation of waiting (being *available* for Shirley's pleasure and vague acting opportunities) has already lasted three years. There is no sense of urgency; questions concerning his credibility as an actor and his future plans are besides the point. Gerald's sunny statuary of a self can only bask so long before some event cracks it open to expose its emptiness and unfulfilled promise. That event, as we will see, is the mindless destruction of a wild pheasant, provoking him to question his moral drift.

Gerald is outwardly a satisfied man—in the words of Emmanuel Levinas he has become "imbourgeoised," or *waxed fat*.<sup>8</sup> His basic nutritional and bodily needs are taken care of, an unusual state of affairs compared to the condition of scarcity which afflicts most of Carver's characters. Carver himself "loved the idea of a full basket," according to his good friend, Richard Ford. "Cornucopia was his concept of a minimal good time."<sup>9</sup> This is Carver's nonjudgmental

through which many writers have to pass in their development to maturity (some of course never make it out). In this regard Carver's story takes a look at nascent conflicts of aesthetic selfhood and freedom before the far more intense issues of parenting (as documented, for example, in the essay "Fires") arise.

### Road of Silence

"Gerald Weber didn't have any words left in him. He kept quiet and drove the car." So begins Carver's road narrative "The Pheasant," but unlike Kerouac's road saga there is a grim absence of garrulity. *On the Road* was a talk-fest, an orgy of words between friends in the open air of a new freedom that placed friendship above all else, including family and job security. But in Carver's story not only is there silence instead of words, friendship is also curiously absent as Gerald drives the car. So is passion. It is not his car. It is not his life. The car belongs to his lover Shirley, the older woman sitting next to him; Gerald more or less belongs to her, too. He is a kept man. It is the middle of the night and they have been driving from Shirley's house in Hollywood through "long silences." The atmosphere is marked by a crepuscular awareness:

From time to time, smoking, she looked across at him through the dark gloom of the big car. Somewhere between San Luis Obispo and Potter, California, a hundred and fifty miles or so from her summer house at Carmel, she gave up Gerald Weber as a bad investment—she'd made others, she reflected wearily and fell asleep on the seat.  
(165)

These two can no longer keep each other awake. Shirley is a person who makes investments in stocks and people. Gerald, whose youthful masculinity has been funded to supplement Shirley's aging beauty, has just as likely never made an investment and views all such financial planning as if it took place on another planet. The mood we find him

the domestic oblivion of his final phase, when he drank himself to death while hiding behind curtains with Stella and his mother,<sup>3</sup> the living symbol of Beathood remains the "open road" and its unconventional lifestyle. John Cheever remarks in his *Journals* that the conditions which are absent from the Beat lifestyle are precisely those that made his own work possible—a stable family life with a wife, children, dogs, and a big house in the suburbs.<sup>4</sup> He finds Kerouac's unchecked freedom, the Beat lifestyle and anti-aesthetic, incomprehensible if not frightening. As the *Journals* make painfully clear, Cheever's libidinal life was by no means saintly. Yet to sustain his optimistic vision, his moral conscience outfitted itself with the disciplinary structure associated with safeguarding a suburban family and lifestyle. A charming household was absolutely necessary for his emotional and spiritual career, even when he could not afford it; his role as a "country husband" seemed essential even though he suffered from a lack of intimacy and desperate pangs of loneliness. The personal sacrifice involved in preserving this (largely material) infrastructure somehow proved to his conscience that his was a spiritual undertaking, after all. In this regard he would agree with Thomas Merton's remark about the relation between freedom and conscience. "Conscience is the soul of freedom, its eyes, its energy, its life. Without conscience, freedom never knows what to do with itself. And a rational being who does not know what to do with himself finds the tedium of life unbearable."<sup>5</sup>

Raymond Carver's moral position on this issue seems to be somewhere between Kerouac and Cheever, but in any case less hypocritical than either one. To be sure, unlike Cheever he finally got divorced, but his family was not something his conscience easily allowed him to put behind him. As anyone who has read the remarkable volume of essays, stories, and poems titled *Fires* can tell you, Carver's feelings about the tense relation between family life and writing are ambivalent and downright perplexing.<sup>6</sup> His story "The Pheasant," which appeared in *Fires*, is Carver's muted elegy to Beathood.<sup>7</sup> Here Beathood means not so much the specific literary movement as the bohemian phase of undisciplined spontaneity and self-indulgence

# Roadkill and the Birth of Thought

C. S. Schreiner

## Antinomies of Freedom

Some modern writers and philosophers have addressed themselves to the following question: When is freedom liberating and enabling, and when, unjust or even destructive? The issue of guns in America is a case in point. Although the right to bear arms is based on the principle of individual freedom, this right has become such a convention as to thwart efforts to put it in question. Freedom has become the final word that halts open debate. Yet freedom of thought asserts the right to put freedom to shoot in question when it becomes a banal convention whose historical conditions of genesis (threats from frontier menaces and British forces) have disappeared or become radically transformed. The safety of those who prefer not to bear arms depends on such a questioning; so does the moral justice of American society. It is in response to such a problem that the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has said "Freedom discovers itself murderous in its very exercise."<sup>1</sup> The key words here are *discovers itself*: freedom has room to test and refine itself. Freedom is not the final word of self-understanding, but its provocation for further inquiry.

One of the most ambient chords of Jack Kerouac's famous anthem to spontaneity, *On the Road* (1957), is its first sentence. "I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up."<sup>2</sup> The entire adventure that will cascade upon us begins with the break up of a traditional relationship. In spite of what Kerouac's biography has revealed about