

Emotional Indirection

*On Amy Hempel's "The
Afterlife"*

Jim Shepard

Besides sheer economy, if there's one strategy central to that group of American writers who have been tagged as minimalists by reviewers and critics—from Raymond Carver, as presented by Gordon Lish in the late seventies, to Amy Hempel now—it might be the strategy of emotional indirection, in particular a specific type of emotional indirection: the gambit of a narrator's telling someone else's story as a way of telling her own. Given that minimalism dramatized in its very form the tension inherent in so much literature between the need to release and the need to protect certain emotional information, it's probably not surprising that so many of minimalism's protagonists seem to operate that way. This strategy is a version of something literature has done forever, of course—the old objective correlative—but this new version has its own taxonomic features, features that are useful for understanding twenty-first-century American fiction, features that are lucidly on display in a short story like Amy Hempel's "The Afterlife," from her collection *The Dog of the Marriage*.

Oscar Wilde wrote, "Man is least himself when he talks in his own persona. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth." There's a painful intimacy involved in the writing of literary fiction, if the writer is going about it the right way, since, if she's writing about what she thinks is important, a) it represents to her in some crucial way an irresolvable conflict or collision of values, and b) it seems painfully close to home. But as anyone who's been involved with a literary writer will tell you, a comprehensive and naturally occurring emotional openness might *not* be our most common trait. Which means that when we grapple with those issues that we find most charged, we're all looking for ways to instruct ourselves in—or, for those who are even more recalcitrant—trick ourselves into more rigorous forms of emotional honesty.

One way of doing that is immersing oneself in what at first seems to be the safety of an entirely alien sensibility—say, the em-

peror Hadrian, in Marguerite Yourcenar's magnificent novel *Mem-oirs of Hadrian*, or that of any number of unsuspecting nineteenth-century Nebraskans blindsided by the worst blizzard in their state's history in Ron Hansen's story "Wickedness"—in order to discover that it's not, of course, so entirely alien a sensibility after all. Which is why the writer was drawn to it in the first place. Those writers had already discovered that attempting to understand crucial aspects of an alien sensibility's operating methods, in all of its dysfunctional glory, would in its roundabout way provide some understanding of their own hopelessly opaque and muddled inner lives.

More commonly, though, American fiction writers have instructed themselves in a more rigorous form of emotional honesty by imagining they were really writing about their mothers or lovers or best friends and then discovering in the attempt that they seemed to be learning a whole lot about whoever was doing the perceiving.

Amy Hempel's "The Afterlife" is a nice example of the kind of emotional indirection in which Hempel specializes. There's a *huge* tension, in her protagonists, between guarding information and needing to release it. Part of her way of embodying that tension, of course, is through the epigrammatic economy for which she's known. And one of her other less obvious but equally central strategies over the years has been to have a protagonist present what appears to be a compassionate and often witty examination of someone else's problem, which quietly then reveals itself to be something else entirely, or at least primarily. So that her most famous story, "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried," initially offers itself as its narrator's grieving portrait of a dying friend's heroic wryness in the face of death, but turns out to be even more about the narrator's crushing sense of shame at her inadequacy as a friend when it counted most. And the alacrity with which even she—who loved her friend so much—was able to put herself first.

Negotiating any work of literary fiction means engaging nearly immediately on some level with two interpretive issues—*What's at*

stake here? And Who's in trouble, and how much?—but “The After-life” begins by vexing both of those questions, especially the second one.

When my mother died, my father's early widowhood gave him social cachet he would not have had if they had divorced. He was a bigger catch for the sorrow attached.

This is so epigrammatically vivid about the father that at first we nearly overlook that it's even *more* characterizing about the speaker. *The first thing I want you to know about Dad—and myself—is that we suffered a loss. But let's move past that as fast as we possibly can—Mom's death is relegated to the opening dependent clause!—in order to get to the real first thing I want you to know about Dad: the heart of the sentence in grammatical terms. That big loss that Dad had: didn't it make him more attractive? Catastrophe, in Dad's case, gave him a leg up. And you know what? That's something I admire. And it's also something that I'm willing and able, in my understated way, to judge.*

The sentence manages to occlude—partially through what seems to be a frank and reasonable matter-of-factness—a large part of what turns out to be, upon further examination, its startling ruthlessness.

“...my father's early widowhood gave him a social cachet he would not have had if they had divorced.” Well. Lucky him.

Consider the elegance—both tender and slightly demolishing—of “He was a bigger catch for the sorrow attached.” That elegance is a kind of compression. And inside that compression is the inner tension that powers the story: the tension between a narrator who's simultaneously *compassionate* and *dispassionate* about that person in the world who means the most to her.

“He was kind, cultured, youthful, and good-looking, and many women tended to him,” the narrator informs us, and the syntactical progression tells us she knows that those women didn't dote on her

father *only* out of compassion. He did have “kind, cultured, youthful, and good-looking” going for him. They not only cooked dinner for him but they also “sent their housekeepers to his Victorian near the Presidio Gate”: the first of many class markers that indicate that the narrator is also aware of the *other* ways in which Dad already had a leg up.

Her brothers were away at college, the narrator tells us, “but I, who had dropped out of school, spent a good deal of time at the house.” This is the first of a series of off-handed and interconnected indications that the narrator’s situation, although she herself chooses almost never to talk about it directly, may be more dire than her father’s. Note how off-handed this first indication really is: the red flags that are raised by the news that she’s dropped out of school are lowered somewhat by the banality of where the sentence seems to end up: *so, anyway, I spent a good deal of time at the house.*

“Some of the women who looked after my father banked their right actions for later, I felt,” she goes on to tell us, and we note the verb *banked’s* casual way of suggesting compassion as calculation, and note as well the narrator’s making explicit that she’s the one doing the judging: *I felt*. We learn the various ways in which women strike out with Dad, and we learn as well that the narrator believes it’s because they’re offering exoticism and change—candied ginger and snail shells, etc.—whereas she’s providing the comfort of the quotidian, and continuity: those Oreos and Fig Newtons she props alongside the other stuff so her brothers would find something familiar when they came home.

A couple of women, she notes, courted *her* as the best bet—speaking of compassion as calculation—and she says about the various rivals’ ministrations, “I was not used to that kind of attention, and seeing through it didn’t mean I didn’t also like it.” And with the first half of that sentence, just that quietly, a whole history of neglect—probably maternal neglect—is suggested. Our narrator liked the attention because she needed it. We note the implication that even *that* much attention was more than she was used to. And

the second half of her sentence registers one of the paradoxes at the story's heart: that compassion delivered partially in calculation is still a form of compassion. A huge amount of Amy Hempel's work, in thematic terms, is about the struggle to separate the strands of selfishness from selflessness in our intimate relationships.

We might well ask ourselves: *why* is Jane, who's about to appear, so perfect a match for the narrator? We've already learned that the narrator wants to both give (remember the Oreos) and receive care. It's already becoming clear that Dad is not much interested in enabling either one. Jane is. Jane's going to be offering to solve two problems at once: putting herself forward as both a partner to Dad and a surrogate mother to the narrator.

"The woman I liked—for a while she came over every night." Part of what it means to be successfully economical is to take great advantage of pronouns. "*The woman I liked...*": as in, *There were a lot of women. How many did I like?*

And here's a good rule of thumb, when it comes to negotiating an Amy Hempel story: crucial emotional information will always follow the story's first dash. (One of her early stories begins "My heart—I thought it stopped.") "The woman I liked—for a while she came over every night." So: disappointment and loss are *built into* Jane's very introduction.

It turns out that every night she would come over and the narrator's father would make her a drink, stirring it with a chopstick. In a story less than six pages long that chopstick, of all things, gets mentioned *twice*, and there's a reason for that. Immediately after we learn that Dad's stirring drinks with a chopstick we learn that he would then carry the drinks into "where he had seated her on the toast-colored Italian couch in front of the fire." A "toast-colored Italian couch"? So apparently he's *not* Seth Rogen. He's not stirring drinks with a chopstick because he's a slob. Then why is he? Consider the theatricality of the gesture, when it comes to his self-presentation as a man undone by grief. *Hey: want a drink? Here. Let me stir it with this butcher knife. What difference does it make anymore,*

anyway? Am I being too hard on him? The narrator notices, again, on the next page, his dogged insistence on that chopstick as part of his routine with Jane: “Every night they returned to his house, he mixed her a drink with a wooden chopstick...” And that follows immediately on the heels of Dad’s confession to Jane about precisely that theatricality that the chopstick represents: he made a fool of himself on his travels after his wife’s death, he recounts, because he “was posing the whole time ... playing the part of a man in grief, from St. Petersburg to Captiva.” A page later, when we’re told that another one of his habits was to divest himself of yet another *thing* whenever Jane was leaving—speaking of the theatricality of I-have-nothing-to-live-for gestures—one of the items that the narrator takes the time to note that he gives away is a glass stirrer for drinks.

The narrator’s father’s house “was a hundred years old, but the furniture was futuristic. *She* was futuristic,” the narrator tells us about Jane. “She was forward-looking, although the past was what they had between them.” They’re a match! And on what terms? Even despite the past, Jane can see a future. She’s the perfect woman to help them both, because she seems to a) bring to the table both a worldview that’s exactly what the father needs to shake him out of the perversity of his stasis, and b) provide for the narrator a kindred spirit who knows what she’s going through and what she needs.

How did Jane happen to reunite with the narrator’s father in the first place? The narrator looked her up when in Chicago. And when she discovered that Jane was heading to San Francisco, the narrator told her father to take the woman to dinner. Without announcing she was doing it, in other words, the narrator had decided a while ago that it fell to her to be proactive and kick-start this family again. Apparently it paid off: on the second date, Jane showed up with a cashmere sweater for the narrator: “a ‘finder’s fee,’ she said.” And thereby began to further cement her appeal: you give a finder’s fee to another adult who’s performed a valuable service. As a gesture it’s witty and respectful. It also acknowledges the usefulness of

self-interest: *You did a good turn for me; I'll do a good turn for you.*
We're back to compassion and calculation again.

On the third date, it's a threesome.

Other of the women had wanted me along so my father could see them draw me out. Jane wanted me there because we thought the same things were funny. When my father complained about a nosy woman who detained him in the grocery store, Jane said, "That's the trouble with people in general—you have to run into them."

Apparently even the *other* women knew that the narrator was in enough distress that she needed to be drawn out. Being able to minister to *her*, they realized, would be a necessary part of their application process. Apparently the amount of difficulty that the narrator has been in has been much clearer than the narrator has let on. Jane, by contrast, wanted the narrator along because they both thought the same things were funny. And what are those same things? Dad complains about a nosy woman. And Jane's joking response is about misanthropy. Her joke is instructing Dad—and the narrator—on how to climb out of their self-imposed isolation.

"When I hung back a bit walking to the car," the narrator continues, Jane tells her, "'Take up space!' and pulled me along by the arm." Jane and the story are reminding us of the narrator's tendency toward a kind of recessive invisibility; and with those three words Jane is providing exactly the right kind of maternal advice—advice, we're invited to speculate, that's perhaps the opposite of what her real mother gave her. As she did before, the narrator appreciates being treated like an adult, and being let in on important intimacies: "The next week she didn't mind that I saw my father walk her to the front door in the morning."

The narrator is showing us what *she* values and needs by closely examining someone else: Jane. The operating method here is a version of Ernest Hemingway's claim about the primary way in

which his fiction operated: “A hard light thrown on objects softly illuminates the beholder.” (That’s an aesthetic that provides crucial operating instructions for puzzling out how a story like his “Big Two-Hearted River” works. We look at one thing, and it evokes emotion about something else: the old objective correlative, reconfigured in a nicely understated way.)

Dad’s clearly in some trouble, here, we’ve figured out. He seems to be in the process of shutting down, and in a disconcertingly untroubled way. And the narrator lets us know in a beautifully understated way that Jane is extraordinarily patient with his ongoing self-absorption: every night they return to his house, he stirs her drink with that same chopstick, and he walks her through trips *he’s* taken, with his late wife. Well: how nice for Jane. And notice how graciously Jane hints around about how he’s behaving: “Jane told him she would have *thought* she would be more interested in hearing about the places she had not seen herself, but was, in fact, more interested in where they had gone in this country, especially the places she knew, too, along the coast of Florida.” She offers a lovely and romantic response to his self-absorption: “‘What year was that?’ she would ask, then do the math to see what she had been doing at the time.” *You talk about where you were, without me. I’ll match that to where I was, and in that way bring us together.*

Dad’s not to be comforted, though. He gives away his possessions, one by one, each time she leaves. Some of them are genuine and heartfelt gifts—a pumpkin pie he made himself, for example—and others are purely theatrical gestures. Does Jane recognize that? “Most of it she gave to the women’s shelter she was in town to advise.” And then she continues to relent, “... and let him to return to a place she’d never been....”

Her patience has limits, though. “On the last night she visited my father, she asked him if the two of them might go somewhere together.” The coming disaster is indicated in the opening clause: that was the night she finally fully registered the implacable perversity of the

narrator's father's *pride* in his emotional stasis, and that's also when she learned the nature of his version of the Edenic. She doesn't fail for lack of trying, however. She starts by asking—after however many nights of listening to him recount his trips with his dead wife—if the two of *them* might go somewhere together. The narrator registers with pride how funny his response is—“Darling, I don't go to the *dining room* anymore”—even as she also registers both its perversity and its aggression. Jane isn't backing down yet, though. Her next question is not a small one: “Is there a place you *could* go and be happy?” Dad's answer is wonderfully grudging: “My father said that maybe he could go back to Aspen.”

Okay, then. And what does Dad's best-place-ever look like? Turns out that's where he and his wife went for a handful of years. Were his children a big part of that pleasure? “...sometimes we kids went.” Did he have rapturously good times with his wife, at least? “My father knew a lot about classical music, so he was happy discussing the afternoon program with the First Chair Violin while my mother read on a chaise in the sun, and my brothers tried to land on me in the deep end from the high board.”

And what was it like for the narrator? “I got to stay in the car and drink Tab after a rock I picked up freed something I still have dreams about.”

Hmm. Was that world fraught for her? Apparently. And quite a bit more than she might have let on. She was the kind of girl who would be wiped out for the day because of something she found under a rock. And we note that while she's communicating this, she's also slipping in a metaphoric justification for emotional guardedness. Even then, she's reminding us, turning over rocks had the potential to generate lifelong nightmares.

This by the way is a typical admission by an Amy Hempel protagonist; it's the way her version of minimalism works: what makes the line funny is the way it's very clear about the extremity of the trauma, and absolutely opaque as to the exact nature of what catalyzed it.

Aspen might not have worked for her, the narrator tells us, but she did have another option:

...*water* was going to be my place on earth, not swimming pools at small hotels, but lakes, the ocean, a lazy-waved bay, ponds ringed with willows, and me the girl swimming under low-hanging branches brushed by leaves for the rest of my days.

Here, finally, is where the narrator says she belongs, and her image of sanctuary is that of herself as Ophelia, already forsaken. In one gesture she not only re-registers her distress, but also *its* theatricality: a theatricality a lot like her father's.

"The things you think of to link are not in your control," the poet Anne Carson has written. "It's just who you are, bumping into the world. But how you link them is what shows the nature of your mind. Individuality resides in the way links are made."

Jane, however—back to that fateful night—still hasn't given up, though her first two questions went nowhere. Okay, she thinks: Aspen. Let's see if we can nail that down, and get him to think about it. "I heard Jane ask my father if he was happiest when he was in Aspen. He said, 'I was, and then I wasn't.'" Her third attempt has generated only more maddening caginess from Dad. And despite all that, she tries a final, fourth time: "She said, 'You can *was* again.'" The indirect discourse of Dad's answer emphasizes how painful its casualness really was: "He said he didn't think so." No wonder she didn't come back the next day.

She sends a note to the narrator a couple of weeks later. The weeks suggest the extent of the hurt and anger. She's writing to suggest that she's giving up on Dad, and now warning the narrator: because she's already figured out that the extent to which the narrator can or will move on may depend on the extent to which her father will move on. Is she angry? "She said she understood that

my father's life had ended with my mother's death..." Ouch. Is she trying to instruct? "...and that what he inhabited now was a kind of afterlife—not dead, but not alive to possibility, to what else one might choose, and 'Who would choose to live less?' she asked." Yes: who would?

Jane's been aware that the narrator is someone for whom watchfulness has long since become a survival skill. That watchfulness—and its corollary, a habit of detachment—has become for the narrator a second nature, an occupational hazard of her isolation. Her father is suffering, even more willfully, from the same condition: the sense that life is not there for him to engage, but to review, and/or to judge. But if that sort of focused observation is part of the problem, Jane is there to remind the narrator—and us—that it's also a huge part of the solution. Because if you're *really* paying attention, you *will* be re-immersed in life. In Simone Weil's lovely formulation, attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity. Or as Eudora Welty once put it: "Focus means awareness, discernment, order, clarity, and insight. They are like the attributes of love."

The narrator doesn't mention Jane's note to her father. She asks instead if he wished Jane still came over. If he says he does, we know she'll be on the phone in an instant. And Dad's answer is pure Dad, in its bland generosity and perverse passivity: "He said she was a terrific person."

What follows, then, on the narrator's part, is dispirited, and sounds like it: "The women that followed included..." Etc. That's the category, now, for both of them: the women that followed. The woman he sees now seems decent and kind. Well, there's that, anyway. And when that woman is leaving, Dad asks the narrator "if I didn't think she looked a little like Jane Stein." Which stands, in its complexity, as a lovely combination of both Dad's wistful inability to forget Jane and his willingness to twist the knife when it comes

to his daughter. Why would he feel any aggression toward his daughter on the subject of Jane? Well, the whole thing was his daughter's idea in the first place, wasn't it.

She picks up on his aggression and tells him, "That was a long time ago." And he picks up on *hers*, and comes back at her with both barrels: "...and he said, so I understood him, '*Nothing* is a long time ago.'" It's hard to think of four words in a final sentence as reorienting and devastating as that "*so I understood him.*" The narrator is grabbing our figurative lapels the way her father grabbed hers, and confronting us with the cruelty and the breathtaking ruthlessness of what he's saying. Traditional advice to someone paralyzed with grief is *It's time to move on*. Dad is saying *It'll never be time to move on, because I say so. Here is my amended life philosophy, for better and for worse. Understand me: I am not getting better. I am not letting this go. And: I say that to you knowing as I do that on some level you have linked your recovery to mine.*

We've plunged through quite a false bottom here, in terms of dismaying revelations. It's *not* that Dad hasn't realized the damage he's been doing by indulging himself. He's willing to *pay* that cost. He's willing to let his daughter *know* that he's willing to pay that cost. And he's willing to see *her* pay that cost.

That's the sort of harrowing emotional resting point that most writers—most people—don't go looking for. And it was the indirection in Amy Hempel's method of constructing her story that allowed her to get there.

Some of us get there, every so often, for a little while. "I always wanted to be tough," the poet Richard Hugo once wrote. "And in my poems, I could get tough, at least with myself. I could create something, out of my past personal sense of futility, in language hard enough to prohibit wallowing in melancholy. For the duration of the poem, I became a man sufficiently honest to warrant my own approval."

