Cohesion in the Work of Raymond Carver

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Introduction

In this article I aim to show how Raymond Carver uses linguistic cohesion in his short story "Distance" to represent the dynamics of human relationships, and in the poem "The Garden" to represent a sequence of memories. The methodology of the analysis is rooted in stylistics, and I provide a brief overview of this, as well as a basic introduction to cohesion. In my previous stylistic analysis of poetry (Green 1996) I dealt with the work of Alexander Pope. This paper deals with the modern short story writer and poet, Raymond Carver, whose work, I believe, should be more accessible and relevant to students studying English as a second language. A short biography of Carver is included to further these characteristics of his work.

Stylistics

Stylistics was introduced into school and university curricula in the 1960s. It was closely related to American New Criticism and British Practical Criticism. All three movements took a formalist approach to the study of literature, treating it as "a self-contained enterprise" (Verdonk 1993: 1). This meant that the author's biographical details, his or her intentions, and socio-historical and cultural influences were all ignored as irrelevant to the meaning of a piece of literature. The meaning was to be found only in the words on the page.

This school of stylistics became popular with teachers of both native and non-native students, and as a result it is now known as "pedagogical stylistics". It is exemplified in "Stylistics and Second

Language Learning" (Green 1996). In that article I draw on some more recent approaches to literature in order to justify the use of literature in the second language classroom, most notably reader-response theory and the linguistics of contact. Reader-response theorists argue that reading is a form of authorship; a reader's cultural background and experience interact with a text in order to form the meaning. Linguistics of contact is a theory which proposes that we only become aware that we speak a certain variety of a language when we come into contact with speakers of a different variety. The difference is what gives us a sense of linguistic identity, but ironically in the past this difference also led to the withholding of literature from members of other linguistic groups.

In using these two approaches to reading and literature to support my arguments, I was following a trend of the past twenty years or so, in which a new school of contextualized stylistics has come about in response to the criticism that "the meaning relationship between words and things in the world they denote is by no means unproblematic" (Verdonk 1993: 1). This second school and the first are not antagonistic, but interdependent. Stylisticians working in the contextualized school recognize that words and their meanings cannot be divorced from their contexts, and therefore treat literary texts "as part of a complex social and cultural process" (ibid., p.2).

Raymond Carver

Raymond Carver was born in Oregon in 1938. After finishing high school he worked at a sawmill with his father, and got married soon after his nineteenth birthday. He moved to California in 1958 where he graduated from college. During this time he began to publish poems and stories in little magazines. By the early 1970s his literary reputation had grown so much that he was offered jobs as visiting

professor at several universities. However, because of his increasingly serious drinking problem, his early teaching career was not a great success.

Despite these inauspicious beginnings, Carver's career later blossomed. He was internationally acclaimed, his work was widely read, and he continues to have great influence on American literature. Between 1976 and 1988 he published ten books of poetry and prose, as well as chapbooks and limited editions. An eleventh book, of poems, was published posthumously in 1989. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship, *Poetry* magazine's Levinson Prize, a National Book Circle Critics Award, the Mildred and Harold Strauss Living Award, nominations for the Pulitzer Prize, and an honorary Doctorate of Letters from Hartford University. He has been called the rejuvenator of the American short story, the godfather of literary minimalism, and the most imitated writer since Hemingway.

In stark contrast to his early years, the final ten years of his life were happy. His work was recognized internationally, he overcame his addiction to alcohol, and he married the writer Tess Gallagher. Despite this, his work continued to reflect the hardships of his early life. His style is spare and precise, modulating in mood from darkly humorous to grim to positively eerie. His stylistic predecessors are usually noted as Hemingway and Kafka, and his subjects are often the woes and enchantments of modern (industrial, urban, suburban) life, and therefore have strong connections to the work of Sherwood Anderson, John O'Hara and John Cheever, and to the Russian writers Turgenev and Chekov, in whom Carver was intensely interested.

The "new realism" of Carver and his contemporaries (for example Cheever, Richard Ford, Mary Robison and Tobias Wolff) is a formal reaction to the literary forms of the immediate past, to the baroque projects of the postmodernists with their complex or non-existent

plots. The new realists return to traditional narrative structure, in a sense leapfrogging back over the immediate literary past to a more distant one. In 1987 Carver wrote "The current profusion in the writing and publishing of short stories is...the most eventful literary phenomenon of our time. It has provided the tired blood of mainstream American letters with something new to think about and even - any day now, I suspect - something to take off from...the fact is the resurgence of interest in the short story has done nothing less than revitalize the national literature" (Michigan Quarterly Review 26: 710-711). The appeal and influence of the new realism is wide: after nearly two decades in which the short story was largely ignored in America it is once again a vital literary form. Raymond Carver, foremost among a handful of writers, has been credited with its revival.

Although Carver is best known for his short stories, he also published six volumes of poems, and two other books which were a combination of prose works and poetry. The introduction to *All of Us: The Collected Poems* (Carver 1996) is written by Carver's widow, Tess Gallagher, who notes that he wrote fiction and poetry in tandem from 1957 to his death in 1988. The poetry was not written between stories, but rather "was the spiritual current out of which he moved to write the short stories" (Carver 1996: xxiii). Even a brief perusal of *Raymond Carver: An Oral Biography* (Halpert 1995) shows that he did not regard his poetry as something he turned to when he wanted a rest from fiction. In the introduction to *A New Path to the Waterfall*, Carver's posthumously published collection of poetry, Tess Gallagher wrote that "poetry was a spiritual necessity." It could be that Carver has done as much to challenge the idea of what poetry can be as he did to reinvigorate the short story.

The concept of cohesion

Cohesion as a linguistic phenomenon is too broad a subject to deal with adequately here. It has been extensively explored by Halliday and Hasan (1976), and I would recommend any interested reader to find a copy of that text. Here it is possible only to provide a brief summary of the main features of cohesion which are directly relevant to this study.

The concept of cohesion has to do with semantics; it refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text, and that define it as a text.

When our understanding of some element in the text is dependent on that of another element, then cohesion occurs. If one element cannot be effectively decoded without recourse to the other, it is said to presuppose the other element. In such a case, the two elements (the presupposing and the presupposed) form a relation of cohesion, and in this way can be integrated into a text.

Language contains systematic resources of reference, for example ellipsis. These resources are the potential source of cohesion. Whether or not cohesion is present in a text depends not only on choosing a particular option from these resources, but also on the presence of another element which will resolve the presupposition that this choice sets up. A single word like *elk* has no cohesive force of its own. Only the previous occurrence of the same word or a related word such as *animal* will set up a cohesive relation. In the same way, neither does a pronoun like *us* have any cohesive force of its own, unless there is some explicit referent for it nearby. In both of these examples, it is the relation between the two words which create cohesion. In addition to pronouns and repetition (or parallelism), nominal demonstrative determiners with deictic function, and questions and answers are analysed here.

In the following analyses of the short story "Distance" and the

poem "The Garden", I examine the ways in which Raymond Carver uses cohesion to create literary effects. It will be seen in "Distance" that cohesive relations in the text closely mirror the human relationships between the characters. In "The Garden" Carver uses cohesion, or rather lack of it, to represent a stream of memories through the author's mind.

"Distance"

This story was originally published in the collection *Furious Seasons* in 1977. More recently it has been reprinted in *Where I'm Calling From: The Selected Stories* (1993)[1].

The story has a frame structure, in that it begins and ends with a conversation between a young woman and her father. The main body of the story, told in the third person by the father, is the subject of this study. The main story describes a young married couple (the frame story's father and his wife) who have just had a baby. The husband ("the boy" in the story) telephones an old friend of his father (Carl), to plan a hunting trip, which his wife ("the girl") approves of. However, during the night before the boy is due to go hunting, the couple's daughter falls ill and will not stop crying. The boy still intends to go hunting and his wife becomes upset. The boy leaves home and drives to Carl's house, where he has a short conversation with Carl, tells him he cannot go hunting this time, and drives back home. When he arrives his wife and daughter are asleep. The boy takes off his outer clothes, and starts to make breakfast. His wife wakes up and comes into the kitchen to help him. When he starts to eat his breakfast, the boy tips the full plate into his lap, and all the food sticks to his long woollen underwear.

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1 Unfortunately I am unable to append this story here. Please consult Carver 1993.

They both laugh at the boy's situation and at the end of the story they hug and kiss.

Even from this summary it is possible to see that the "distance" between the boy and girl varies. They begin and end the story in an intimate relationship, but when their daughter is sick and the boy leaves to go hunting, the relationship becomes less so. An analysis of the cohesive devices in the story shows how they mirror the movements in the couple's relationship.

Cohesion in "Distance"

1. Pronouns

In Carl's dialogues with the boy he is the dominant subject of his own conversation and this means that he uses the first person pronoun a great deal. Analysis of the couple's use of personal pronouns and their referents will show any such prominence as well as how the characters are grouped together.

The boy begins his conversation with the girl using inclusive first person plural pronouns 'us' and 'we' in, for example 'Let's plan on that' and 'If we weren't married'. The boy's next use of the pronoun 'we' has different referents and excludes his family: 'Carl's planning on me going. We've planned it' where 'we' refers to Carl and the boy together. The noun and pronoun of the first sentence are united in the pronoun of the second. The two other cases of first person plural pronoun that the boy uses both refer to him and his wife. In his speeches about Betsy and Sally (the girl's sisters) he uses the first person pronoun 'I' except for one 'you' which is a colloquial replacement for the impersonal 'one', rather than a reference to his wife. When answering his wife's question about whom he really loves, he returns to first person plural 'we', before moving to third person pronouns in the speech about the mating habits of geese.

When talking about hunting the boy uses a mixture of first and third person singular pronouns, for example 'You can't think about it when you're doing it' and 'I love to just watch them even when I'm not hunting them.' The use of the operator verb and pronoun in the first example refers to killing geese. The boy does not attach a first person pronoun to this action, but he does use 'I' as the subject of the verb 'love'. In this speech the pronoun 'I' has the predicates 'love' (twice) and 'am not hunting'. 'You' has the predicates 'can't think' (twice) and 'doing'. In the boy's reply 'I'm not mad with you', the referents of 'you' are not clear because the pronouns for singular and plural are the same.

The girl's first person plural pronouns have a number of different referents and groupings. In her first speech she uses 'we' to refer to the baby and herself: 'We'll get along just fine'; and to the boy and her 'we'll dress Catherine up'. All the other four uses of 'we' refer to the boy and the girl. One example which stands out from a context of singular pronouns is 'Maybe we shouldn't have given her the bath.'

The girl uses 'us' three times towards the end of the argument. In the first two cases the pronoun refers to the girl and the baby, but in the third the referents are again unclear: 'You're going to have to choose. Carl or us.' The possible referents are the girl and the baby, the boy and the girl, or the boy and the girl with the baby.

Other important types of pronoun which the girl uses are wh-pronouns and compound pronouns, especially 'something'. This is in keeping with the high number of questions she uses (16), but there are 20 wh- pronouns in her 70 sentences.

2. Demonstrative Determiners

Reference is made not only to other characters. There is a striking use of demonstrative determiners in the couple's last conversation. Two of the boy's four nouns in the speech are prefixed by 'this': 'this bacon'

and 'this pan' where the referents are concrete nouns. The girl uses the same structure four times: 'those things'; 'this breakfast'; 'this bacon'; 'that one'. As demonstrative determiners are used here by both characters, they are a method of cohesion not only between language and specific physical referent, but between characters.

3. Parallelism

Cohesion between characters and between points in the story is achieved by repetition of words, phrases and clauses. For example 'fine' is the most commonly used adjective, occurring five times at the beginning (before Sally and Betsy are mentioned), and three times in the last dialogue.

In the speech on geese the prepositional phrase 'off by itself somewhere' is used first by the boy and then echoed by the girl. Later the girl makes her own phrase cohesion with 'That's not the point and you know it. The point is...'.

Cohesion of clauses provides further links. The boy's early 'if I had to make a choice' is parallelled in the girl's ultimatum 'You've got to choose' and 'You're going to have to choose'. The beginning and end of the story are also linked by the boy's 'That sounds like a good idea' and 'How does a waffle sound with this bacon? - Sounds great.' It is important to note the boy's restatement here, and a similar example occurs in the girl's speech.

> 'But who do you really love? Who do you love most in all the world? Who's your wife? - You're my wife.'

The boy's answer echoes only the last question that the girl asks. Of the six questions that receive an echoic reply, four occur before the boy's simile 'We're like the Canada geese', and two in the last dialogue.

4. Questions

Questions and answers are potentially an important source of cohesion between characters if they abide by what H. P. Grice calls the cooperative principle, made up of the maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner (Leech and Short 1981: 295). It is deviance from these maxims that provides insight into meanings beyond the spoken or written word. Perhaps the closest to an ideal question and answer in "Distance" is 'Who's your wife? - You're my wife' but this ignores the fact that the previous two questions go unanswered. In "Distance" the maxims which are ignored most frequently are of manner and especially of quantity.

The boy ignores both in his answer to the girl's 'What time will you be back?', using 12 words without giving a definite answer, but trying to keep to the maxim of quality. The lengthier answer to 'What about her?' contrasts with his other answers 'Never' and only a nod. Both these answers are followed by longer speeches but only the maxim of quality, as far as we know, remains intact. A short answer which is left so, is 'Going hunting' which is not a complete grammatical sentence. The movement away from lengthy answers ends in the silence which greets three of the girl's questions. Questions also signal a breakdown in communication when the answers ignore the maxim of relation:

'What do you mean you don't know him?'

'That's not the point and you know it.'

'What do you mean? - You heard what I said.'

5. Conclusion

Carl's relationship with the boy is not very intimate. He predominates as the subject of his own speech, and this is true even when he is first told of the couple's new baby. Once he knows that the baby and mother are well he turns to the hunting and tells the boy of

his success without waiting for an inquiry. There are six sentences between Carl's 'If you called about going hunting' and the boy's affirmative 'That's why I called', and Carl uses his most complex sentences in the telephone conversation when talking about hunting.

His own activities are of prime importance to him and his treatment of others may verge on the curt. He calls the boy 'boy' and the girl 'the wife' in all except one case. This may be part of a narrative design to keep the couple anonymous but there is no reason why a possessive pronoun should not be used in this case. 'The wife' is a colloquial expression which involves an element of dehumanization, as if the term is recognized but its relation to the boy is not fully understood. In the context of these vocatives the boy's respect for Carl is evident as he calls Carl by name five times in 75 words. When the girl is called 'your wife' at Carl's house this is followed by a repetition of 'I feel like hell', returning the focus of attention to Carl.

The impression of Carl as a strong character is furthered by his use of imperative forms. He uses the imperative 'Bring lots of shells' and the implied imperative 'just let me hit the lights' which uses the quasi-modal 'let'. The colloquial 'You be here at five-thirty sharp then' has a pronoun disguising the imperative form, so lessening the brusqueness of the sentence. But there is no question that Carl dominates the boy. He says more than three times as much as the boy in the two conversations.

All this may point to Carl's selfish nature. This view must be adapted after Carl is told of the baby's illness. He relegates himself to the occasional subject and object of his speech, and dismisses 'this hunting business'. He uses complex sentences to voice his concern and his sentiments are not expressed in cliches like his earlier good wishes.

In the couple's relationship, grouping of characters with pronouns is an important feature. At the beginning of their dialogue the girl uses

'we' to group herself with the baby and her husband. The boy accepts this in his 'Let's plan on that'. But later when the girl's 'Maybe we shouldn't have given her the bath' stands out from the context of singular pronouns, this illustrates her insecurity. She looks for reassurance from her husband and the safety that numbers provide. When she receives no support from her husband the girl is forced to revert to singular pronouns: 'I know that I ought to give her something...'. Her insecurity is also evident from the high number of sentences which begin with 'I don't know' or similar constructions. After she has lost the grouping with her husband she finds support in the baby. At the end of the argument she calls upon the baby as reinforcement in 'You can't leave us to go hunting'. At this point too, the girl is forced to restate her groupings so the boy is aware of what he is breaking:

> 'I'm your wife. This is your baby. She's sick or something. Look at her. Why is she crying?'

As she simplified her questions earlier, so here the statements are simple and emphatic, including the imperative 'Look at her' which is antithetical to the mood of questions.

The girl has been forced to look for reassurance earlier because of the boy's life outside the marriage. Betsy and Sally are a potential threat as they enable the boy to exclude his wife from his life: 'If we weren't married...'. The simile he chooses for his own marriage is unfortunate in that it comes from outside his wife's experience, so she must question him closely. He talks of death and single geese which is an extension beyond the simile but remains relevant to his own marriage by implication, and is foreboding.

The foreboding which is also present in 'if I had to make a choice' is caught up by the girl's ultimatum 'You've got to choose'. This type of parallelism is used in the argument from the boy's 'Carl's planning on

me going. We've planned it'. He strengthens his statement by putting it into perfect aspect and by uniting the pronouns into 'we', so using one of the girl's techniques. But she is not deterred and condemns even this strengthened version: 'I don't give a damn about what you and Carl have planned'. The boy in turn uses a similar echoic effect but he chooses to attack the weak part of the girl's argument: 'You've met Carl before, you know him. What do you mean you don't know him?'. At this point the boy begins to bluster: he uses questions and imperatives which are unusual for him. His question 'what do you mean?' is correctly interpreted by the girl as a delaying tactic rather than a request for clarification, as is indicated in the imperative 'Wait a minute'. The other imperative 'Don't get hysterical', contains a highly emotive word, associated with lack of control and almost a kind of madness. The girl refutes this by producing ordered subordinate and co-ordinate constructions. She has gained control in the argument by retaining her linguistic control. She no longer uses questions except the rhetorical 'Why is she crying?'. Instead, the boy is forced onto the unfamiliar linguistic ground of questions and imperatives.

The girl adapts some of her idiolect for the argument. For example, strengthened versions of the negative clauses of mental processes. She begins using modal verbs with a sense of moral obligation: 'But I don't think you should go hunting this morning', and she also strengthens and replaces the verbs of mental processes: 'I don't want...'; 'I don't give a damn...'; 'I'm saying you can go hunting any time'. In terms of language the girl wins the argument by maintaining her own idiolect.

At the reconciliation there is an awkwardness evident in the boy's concentration on objects around him rather than emotions or thought, for example in

'It was my fault. How's Catherine?'

'It's all right. Here let me get this bacon.'

'Don't be silly. Here let me do something with this pan.'

The imperative and implied imperatives here are a part of the idiolect used in the argument.

By comparison with the boy, the girl is extremely loquacious. Her eagerness to assure the boy (and herself) that everything is all right is manifest in her repetitions of 'fine' and restatements of the same information. In her desire to please the boy she adopts his use of demonstrative determiners. But the girl's use of 'this' in 'I'll fix this breakfast' sounds abnormal and forced, perhaps because the breakfast does not exist yet and all the boy's determiners had physical referents. In the next sentence the girl feeds the boy with a clause from his own idiolect: 'How does a waffle sound with this bacon?'. The boy's answer ('Sounds great') echoes his earlier 'That sounds like a good idea'. To accept this cue seems like a true sign of reconciliation. The idiolect of the argument used up until this point has made the boy's sincerity questionable. The two are finally reconciled by echoic effects. The girl echoes her husband in 'I was starved. - You were starved' and then he echoes her: 'We won't fight any more. - We won't'. The boy is won back to the girl's group from his grouping with Carl, but the girl must sacrifice her idiolect to his before a final reconciliation can be made.

"The Garden"

Raymond Carver's "The Garden" is made up of the "threads" of memory, which are extracted from temporal continuity and held in timeless suspension in the poet's mind. The reminiscence of the first line of the poem "In the garden, small laughter from years ago" sets the tone of the poem[2].

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2 See Appendix.

The dislocation in time is evident from the lack of cohesion in the text. As Halliday and Hasan (1976: 14) note, the simplest form of cohesion is that in which a presupposed element is verbally explicit and is found in the immediately preceding sentence, for example

Did the gardener water my hydrangeas?

He said so.

There are two types of departure from this norm: either the presupposed element may be elsewhere, in an earlier or later sentence; or it may not be found in the text at all. In "The Garden" there are examples of anaphora (presupposition pointing back to some previous item), contained within short anecdotes (shaving grandpa, the meeting of Goethe and Beethoven), but the norm of cohesion is frequently ignored (Put that on the stone beside *his* name; *She* got off the road...; *Those* horses coming into...). These examples presuppose some specific referent, but Carver defeats this expectation by omitting the substantial element. So leaving cohesive chains incomplete represents memory by dislocation from an original temporal context.

The preponderance of non-finite clauses (Lanterns burning in the willows; Mist rising from the meadow at dawn; Playing checkers with my dad) which are not associated with a finite clause means that much of the poem is timeless, because non-finite clauses cannot be marked for tense. This timelessness is also caused by the use of phrases which stand alone, and contain no verb (From the veranda, the blue outlines of the mountains; Drops of water in your hair. / The dark yellow of fields, the black and blue rivers; Very little sleep under strange roofs.) The short narratives in the poem (visiting grandpa, the meeting between Goethe and Beethoven, Cervantes at the Battle of Lepanto, Tolstoy's requiem) are all written with finite clauses so they are temporally placed. The narratives from history are placed in the past, but the memory of the visit to the hospital is narrated in the present,

making it seem more immediate, and then juxtaposed with the non-finite clause "The dying body is a clumsy partner" which may refer to the grandfather. However, it becomes evident from a consideration of the clauses with a first person singular pronoun as the subject, that the dying body may also be the narrator's. "I" is only found in clauses in the past ("I loved a woman"; I could look down). The one example of "I" plus a present tense verb (I watch him/lather my grandpa's face) has been noted as a special use of the present to create a sense of immediacy. Events in the future which might involve the narrator are either in the form of imperatives to others (Put that on the stone; Order anything you want!), uncertain (Going out for a walk means you intend to return, right?), or use an impersonal pronoun with a conditional tense (To write about it, one would have to write in a way / That would stop the heart and make one's hair stand on end).

The lexis of the poem adds to this sense of ending and death: the gravestone; the dying body of the grandfather, and perhaps the poet; the guttering flame; the requiem and coffin. Only the garden itself and the "Spring" of the last line bring a sense of hope.

Conclusion

The stylistic analysis of literary texts is based in linguistic knowledge; the kind of knowledge which students of English as a second language begin to acquire as soon as they embark on their studies. Although for many years literature has been considered to be the domain of only advanced students, recent trends have once again brought literature back into the ESL classroom. Students learn not only how their second language works, but also what can be done with it in literature that is "an enhancement of everyday language" (Green 1996: 9). Although the terminology which I have used throughout this study may not be familiar to many students, the linguistic features which it

describes most certainly are. Part of our job as educators is to enrich the lives of our students, and the presentation of accessible and relevant literary texts should be part of that job. Students have the linguistic ability to make their own analyses of such texts and should be encouraged to do so.

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Appendix

The Garden
In the garden, small laughter from years ago.
Lanterns burning in the willows.
The power of those four words, "I loved a woman."
Put that on the stone beside his name.
God keep you and be with you.

Those horses coming into the stretch at Ruidoso!
Mist rising from the meadow at dawn.
From the veranda, the blue outlines of the mountains.
What used to be within reach, out of reach.

And in some lesser things, just the opposite is true.

Order anything you want! Then look for the man
with the limp to go by. He'll pay.
From a break in the wall, I could look down
on the shanty lights in the Valley of Kidron.
Very little sleep under strange roofs. His life far away.

Playing checkers with my dad. Then he hunts up
the shaving soap, the brush and bowl, the straight
razor, and we drive to the county hospital. I watch him
lather my grandpa's face. Then shave him.
The dying body is a clumsy partner.

Drops of water in your hair.
The dark yellow of fields, the black and blue rivers.
Going out for a walk means you intend to return, right?
Eventually.
The flame is guttering. Marvelous.

The meeting between Goethe and Beethoven
took place in Leipzig in 1812. They talked into the night
about Lord Byron and Napoleon.
She got off the road and from then on it was nothing
but hardpan all the way.

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She took a stick and in the dust drew the house where
they'd live and raise their children.
There was a duck pond and a place for horses.
To write about it, one would have to write in a way
that would stop the heart and make one's hair stand on end.

Cervantes lost a hand in the Battle of Lepanto.
This was in 1571, the last great sea battle fought
in ships manned by galley slaves.
In the Unuk River, in Ketchikan, the backs of the salmon

under the street lights as they come through town.

Students and young people chanted a requiem
as Tolstoy's coffin was carried across the yard
of the stationmaster's house at Astapovo and placed
in the freight car. To the accompaniment of singing,
the train slowly moved off.

A hard sail and the same stars everywhere.
But the garden is right outside my window.
Don't worry your heart about me, my darling.
We weave the thread given to us.
And Spring is with me.