“I’d just like to get to the bottom of this”: Deferred Narratives of Knowledge and Identity in “Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarets”

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“Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarets” is a hidden gem in the Raymond Carver corpus. Although it has received scant critical attention, it nonetheless adumbrates tensions and techniques characteristic of Carver’s most anthologized and recognized fiction. Specifically, the story meditates on the unfixed nature of identity and knowledge within a story-telling structure shaped by the themes it considers. Like “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” “Where I’m Calling From,” and other preeminent Carver stories, “Bicycles, Muscles, and Cigarets” interrogates the relationship between life as it is lived and life as it is told and remembered.

Commentators rightly point to the final, tender exchange between father and son as a major source of the story’s power. Arthur Saltzman, for example, argues that the story exhibits “cautious but compelling hopefulness” (62); Adam Meyer, that the narrative’s action yields “some of the most honest and heartfelt communications in the entire collection” (60); Arthur Bethea, that the story’s resolution is “not uniformly positive” but proceeds to find parallels between Hamilton’s weaning off his nicotine addiction and the resurrection of Christ (82); and, finally, G. P. Lainsbury, reviewing the morally ambivalent events of the tale, claims that “the negative aspects of what has happened seem to have been mainly cancelled out by the son’s overwhelming love for his father” (108-9). While there is no doubt that this story is unusual in the Carver canon—
the Hamilton household is stable, the husband and wife are compatible, and the final scene is moving—I will argue that the story examines the intricacies of power, knowledge and control (including self-control) as they intersect with the characters’ fluid identities, leading toward a reading that is less stable and less affirmative than those suggested above. As identity—both group and individual—grows less stable, who holds and who can grant power becomes uncertain.

At the heart of the story is the relationship between Evan Hamilton and his son Roger: both have fluid rather than fixed identities, and both have potentially transformative insights that are not, however, complete. To begin to unpack the tangled identities in this father-son relationship, I turn to Stuart Hall’s “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation.” Hall argues that identity is “a ‘production,’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (68). Hall is specifically interested in “cultural identity,” but the notion of “identity in process” can be considered universal as it is based on larger processes of meaning making captured by Derrida’s concept of *différence*. Meaning, for Derrida, is always in progress, both because the relationship between sign and signifier is negatively defined, based on difference, and because meaning is always “deferred,” always displaced by some future meaning. Identity, Hall argues, works similarly: it shifts and shades infinitely, and making meaning, at any moment, “depends on the contingent and arbitrary stop—the necessary and temporary ‘break’ in the infinite semiosis of language” (74). That is, to find meaning, one necessarily arrests the flow of semiotic information and uses what information one has in order to decide what constitutes a given identity at that moment. Even when one considers his or her identity fixed, acts and practices designed to
solidify identity only defer the development of new meaning, which continues to shift just under the surface of what is known.

Hamilton and his son Roger both confront their own identities in process, and Carver expands on Hall by putting these identities-in-process into conversation with narratives-in-process: the story’s secret narrative of the bicycle shades into its unknowable narratives of identity. Indeed, the idea of a narrative ties all of these threads of thought together: to know someone, and to know one’s own identity, is to know one’s narrative, and to exercise power is to exercise power over narrative. Hamilton’s power over himself slips just when he seems to be taking control by physically fighting another man. As Hamilton will soon find out, however, the power he seeks is not determined by violence but by control over the narrative of that violence.

Both power and identity revolve around two hidden narratives within “Bicycles, Muscles, Cigaretts”: the story of the missing bicycle, which provides entry into the mysteries of Roger’s young life; and the story of Evan’s past. Throughout “Bicycles, Muscles, Cigaretts,” the son’s “story” (and, more generally, the world of young boys he belongs to) is probed and explored from an adult perspective parallel with the father’s, but the investigation does not lead to a satisfactory conclusion. Similarly, the tale ends with Roger questioning his father about his past, about the father’s own narrative, which the son feels is equally unknowable—a lost part of his father. The author, too, partakes in this theme of hidden narratives by conspicuously withholding useful information from his readers. As new information emerges and hidden narratives surface, the focus of the story shifts, repeatedly, and seemingly defers the locus of the story’s meaning indefinitely. In this way, the narrative structure of “Bicycles, Muscles, Cigaretts” echoes and intersects a
pattern of gradually unfixing identity, an identity in process, particularly for Evan Hamilton, whose stable identity gradually dissolves. The narrative’s architectonics and identity “intersect” where the plotting of the story does finally conclude—arrests itself—on considerations of generational inheritance, from father to son. In the end, the temporality governing the movement of narrative and generations holds knowability of narrative and identity at bay.

At the outset of the story, Evan, who has just quit smoking, reflects on the invisible omnipresence of cigarettes and their lingering hold on him: “It had been two days since Evan Hamilton had stopped smoking, and it seemed to him everything he’d said and thought for the two days somehow suggested cigarettes” (147). His wife, an ex-smoker herself, sympathizes with him. “It’s as if it sweats out of you,” she says. That which is absent is obsessively present, and cigarettes still have a powerful hold on Hamilton’s life. Shortly thereafter, an older boy appears at the Hamilton residence and tells Evan that his son Roger is over at his house. There has been a dispute about a bike, the boy tells Hamilton, and he has been sent by his parents to fetch one of Roger’s parents. The boy is visibly anxious, “twisting the handle grip” on his bike and unwilling to offer any information beyond the little that he knows for certain.

The social hierarchy initially presents itself in the traditional form where parents hold themselves above kids, but that dynamic becomes more complex as the story develops. Hamilton’s address to his wife illuminates early in the story the assumption that there is a separate reality for adults and children: “It sounds like it’s just a childish argument, and the boy’s mother is getting herself involved” (148). Hamilton wants to confine his son’s problem to the world of children, and he resents the mother’s
involvement in a trivial issue lying below the adult realm. Hamilton’s wife asks if he would like her to go instead, and Hamilton answers: “Yes, I’d rather you went, but I’ll go,” suggesting that he thinks of this task as a masculine duty, one he accepts only reluctantly. His wife also performs a traditional maternal role when she says, “I don’t like his being out after dark.” Both parents’ reactions are typical, avuncular and condescending at the same time.

When Hamilton departs, the power presumably held by the adults immediately begins to shift to the world of the young boys. Following the boy across the neighborhood to fetch Roger, Evan discovers the expansiveness of his son’s life, which contrasts with the narrowness of his own:

Hamilton saw an orchard, and then they turned another corner onto a dead-end street. He hadn’t known of the existence of this street and was sure he would not recognize any of the people who lived here. He looked around him at the unfamiliar houses and was struck with the range of his son’s personal life. (148)

Hamilton enters another kind of reality, very different from the one in which he lives his day-to-day life, a reality over which the boys appear increasingly to have control. Almost as in an epic tale, a young messenger comes to invite Hamilton into the world of the neighborhood children. The whimsically named “Arbuckle Court” adds to this sense of otherworldliness and presages the court-like proceeding that will shortly occur. At the boy’s house, the adult/child power dynamic is further destabilized, with the children in control of the narrative but reluctant to share it. The parents’ power is confined to moderating the discussion, and perhaps to inflicting eventual punishments. The two groups need to work together to solve the issue of the bicycle—and the children would
need to confess in order to activate the adult powers in the room—but that is not what happens.

The attempts by Gilbert’s mother to untangle this mini-drama reveal that there is a problem of discourse between the two worlds: whereas she and Hamilton are interested in sorting out the events and arriving at a larger truth, the boys are interested only in the individual wrongs inflicted upon them and show little concern for an objective analysis that might yield a single narrative and a clear verdict on the missing bicycle. The competing modes and objectives of discourse break the gathering into two separate spheres: that of the parents and that of the children.

Gilbert’s mother (Mrs. Miller) begins by contextualizing the incident: “We were on vacation last month and Kip wanted to borrow Gilbert’s bike so that Roger could help him with Kip’s paper route. I guess Roger’s bike had a flat tire or something. Well, as it turns out—” (149). As she gives this detailed background information, filling in spots in the story she does not know with assumptions, Roger cuts her off: “Gary was choking me, Dad” (149). Roger’s intervention is dramatic and spontaneous; the adult narration is already off track. Pulling down the collar of his T-shirt, he reveals what may or may not be a bruised neck—the author does not say. Roger’s interruption gives the other boys an opportunity to air their individual grievances, further disabling the attempt to produce a single story. This interruption shows the discursive spheres of children and adults as differently coded: whereas the children wish to obfuscate, complicitly maintaining the secrecy of their story, the adults attempt a cooperative interrogation.

Mrs. Miller tries to continue with an explanation of the choking: “I didn’t know what they were doing until Curt, my oldest, went out to see” (149). Significantly, Mrs.
Miller does not enter directly into the children’s world; it takes the adolescent boy to connect the two spheres. Indeed, the position of the “older boys” or adolescents is interesting in this story; a group of them is gathered around a phone, laughing and smoking as the discussion in the kitchen goes on. They serve as messengers and mediators between the adults and the children, and engage in both adult (smoking) and childlike (teasing) behaviors. It was Curt who originally fetched Hamilton from his house and it was he, again, who is sent out by Mrs. Miller when the boys are fighting. When a fight breaks out between the adults at the end of the story, these older boys mimic the adults by throwing playful punches at each other. While the adult and childhood worlds are nominally separate and boundaried, these boys demonstrate how fluid and malleable these identity categories actually are.

After Mrs. Miller’s explanation, Gary insists that Roger “started it” by calling him a jerk. Gilbert, ignoring all other parties and the parent-driven need for a moderated debate and a single story, interjects, “I think my bike cost about sixty dollars, you guys . . . You can pay me for it” (149). His mother is unsatisfied with his comment, but her response—“you keep out of this, Gilbert”—fails to re-assert an adult superiority. The incongruence between the two groups—the calm presumptuousness of the adults punctured by the emotional interruptions of the boys—creates tension. The boys are in possession of the truth, and the adults’ potential for power relies entirely on the boys’ cooperation.

Mrs. Miller attempts to revive her narrative by telling Hamilton that the boys took turns “rolling” the bike. Hamilton asks what “rolling it” means. The boy’s vocabulary, belonging to a separate discourse sphere, is foreign to him. His alienation is highlighted.
by her stilted response, which reads like a definition out of a dictionary: “‘Rolling it,’ the woman said. ‘Sending it down the street with a push and letting it fall over’” (150). Most likely, Mrs. Miller herself had received the definition from one of the older boys only moments before. She tells him, too, that the boys threw the bike against a goal post. When Roger partially confirms the last bit, saying he, Kip and Gary rolled the bicycle a single time each, Hamilton reprimands the boys: “Once is too many times, Roger. I’m surprised and disappointed in you. And you too, Kip.” Hamilton does not, however, say anything to Gary Berman, whom he does not know as well. By his own moral compass, it would go beyond his parental authority to chastise, even if completely justified, a boy he is less familiar with. Hamilton tries to abide by a code of principled adult conduct—as dictated by his identification with an adult sphere—but that code will ultimately unravel.

At this point, the real issue is revealed: the bicycle is missing. This new piece of information makes all the other expositions seem almost irrelevant. Kip gives a detailed but shaky explanation of his last sight of the bike: “The last time we saw it was when me and Roger took it to my house after we had it at school. I mean, that was the next to last time. The very last time was when I took it back here the next morning and parked it behind the house” (150). Kip’s false ending to the story is the first of many hints that the boys do, in fact, know what happened to the bike. They are harboring a secret narrative and Mrs. Miller’s distrust now appears justified.

The arrival of the intimidating Mr. Berman, Gary’s father, changes the tone of the tale dramatically and fractures the more or less homogeneous discourse and code of conduct evident in the adult sphere. Gary, who has barely participated in the conversation thus far, does not get along with the other boys and appears to be waiting for his father to
come to his defense. Mr. Berman’s first request is a full account of events from his own son. Gary delivers his account but, interestingly, Carver chooses to conceal the speech from the reader: “The boy began his account of the affair. His father listened closely, now and then narrowing his eyes to study the other two boys.” Carver here removes the one chance we have of hearing a complete version of the story from one of the boys and not as pieced together by a parent. This is clearly a deliberate choice on Carver’s part and, as part of a story about hidden narratives, this withholding of information invites further scrutiny. Part of its effect is to place the reader in a situation very similar to that of the parents—particularly Hamilton—as they try to figure out what happened to Gilbert’s bike, uncovering along the way surprising events in the world of the boys. In this instance, however, Gary tells his story out loud, in front of the three parents, but the reader is not allowed to listen in. Nor, given the reactions of the listeners, do we get any obvious clues as to its content: Roger and Kip shake their heads, and Roger proclaims, “It’s not true, Gary,” so perhaps Gary has laid the blame on those two boys. Later details will imply that Gary himself ruined the bike and has threatened the other boys not to tell, and thus the relatively muted reactions of Roger and Kip might represent a fine line between complicity and accusation.

Adam Meyer makes the assumption that Gary “plead[s] total innocence” (60) in the concealed speech as well as later, alone with his father. But it is notable that Gary’s story does not draw any reaction from any of the adults. Hamilton, for instance, does not ask his son, “Is that true, Roger?” the way he did earlier, and the way one might expect if indeed Gary had pleaded his innocence. And although Hamilton and Mrs. Miller both hear Gary’s testimony, they still do not know what happened to the bicycle, as Mrs.
Miller responds by saying (twice): “I’d like to get to the bottom of this.” Gary’s story does not solve the mystery but further muddies the waters. There is almost certainly something more to the bicycle story that Roger and Kip do not wish to reveal, or some disparities between Gary’s account and theirs that Carver chooses not to reveal. Again, Carver’s concealment weirdly mirrors and guards the secret the boys are keeping: the author presents a child telling a story without telling us what that story is, thereby forcing us to see the events surrounding the bicycle as ultimately unknowable from an adult perspective.

The issue of narrative concealment is underscored when Gary asks to speak to his father in private and the two retreat into the next room. Hamilton worries: “He had the feeling he should stop them, this secrecy” (151). At this exact moment, he has a desire for a cigarette. Though he does not have any, he is still sweating their scent: “His palms were wet, and he reached to his shirt pocket for a cigarettes. Then, breathing deeply, he passed the back of his hand under his nose . . .” (151). A crisis is building in Hamilton. The secrecy between father and son may seem so uncomfortable because, up until now, the boys have maintained secrecy among themselves, but the adults were zoned off in their separate world. Hamilton assumed that, if the adults were to learn anything, they would all learn it together, but Mr. Berman seems not to share this assumption and with his introduction the sphere of adult discourse shrinks and cracks along lines of gender and class. What Hamilton is on the verge of realizing is that he himself is a liminal and transitional figure, and that his idea of a neat boundary between the worlds of childhood and adulthood is getting blurred. In fact, the alliances among the adults are breaking down just as they did among the children. Hamilton, for instance, now finds himself caught between the
characters of Mr. Berman and Mrs. Miller, who exhibit radically different sensibilities. In direct contrast to Mr. Berman’s accusatory glares, Mrs. Miller, referred to as “the woman,” says, “I’m not accusing any one of them, you understand” (151). While Mr. Berman appears recklessly bull-headed and biased, Mrs. Miller seems incapable of any real judgment. And while Mr. Berman is only willing to listen to his own child, both publicly and secretly, Mrs. Miller refuses even to let her son speak, insisting that he should stay out of the matter. Hamilton finds himself, for the first of two times in “Bicycles, Muscles Cigarets,” uncomfortably positioned between warring sensibilities. During Berman and Gary’s private interface, Hamilton has a direct, non-private confrontation with his son: “Roger, do you know any more about this, other than what you’ve already said?” (151). He does not, however, obtain any new information from his son. During Mr. Berman’s absence, Kip changes his story a bit, saying he left the bike behind the garage, not the house, thereby undermining his credibility even further.

Although Gary has said almost nothing thus far, after his conversation with his father he returns to the kitchen with an accusation: “It was Roger’s idea to roll it” (152). Roger returns Gary’s accusation (“It was yours!”) and adds: “Then you wanted to take it to the orchard and strip it!” The tension heightens as Mr. Berman, breaking generational allegiance and the code of the adult discourse sphere, exclaims to young Roger, “You shut up!” Mr. Berman, having been taken into the confidence of his son (who in all likelihood was lying to him), seems now as immature as anyone in the room. He accuses the boys of being “roughnecks” but this is more accurately a description of himself. In a threatening manner, he says to Kip and Roger: “Now if either of you . . . know where this kid’s bicycle is, I’d advise you to start talking” (152). With these exchanges, Carver
teases out the complexities in how stories are told and heard: Roger provides his father with stumbling half-truths that arouse a mixture of skepticism and sympathy in Hamilton’s mind. Gary, on the other hand, appears simply to lie to his father, and yet this leads to Mr. Berman’s total faith in the truth of Gary’s story.

At this point, Mr. Berman appears even to believe that the other adults no longer have a say in this investigation. When Hamilton says to Berman that he is getting out of line, Berman responds he’d do better to mind his own business. The priority Berman claims over the right to information violates Hamilton’s sense of an “adult” compact to sift through narratives and reason rationally. Just as there are fissures in the boys’ sense of a common code, so too with the adults.

Fed up with this situation, Hamilton decides to leave. His exiting compromise, in which he promises that his son will take partial financial responsibility if need be, is a final attempt at adult moderation: “I intend to talk this over more with Roger, but if there is a question of restitution I feel since Roger did help manhandle the bike, he can pay a third if it comes to that” (152). Whatever is building in Hamilton, however, cannot be stopped. Only a couple of moments later, Hamilton lunges at Berman—“manhandles” him—and pounds his head to the ground. The remark that provokes the fight recalls the remark that caused a fight earlier between Gary and Roger. But in this instance, family members’ roles are reversed. In the boys’ fight, Roger calls Gary a “jerk” and then Gary chokes Roger. Here, when Mr. Berman hears of the earlier remark, he says: “Well he’s [Roger’s] the jerk. He looks like a jerk.” In adopting the argot of boyhood, Mr. Berman undermines the adult-child categorization. Hamilton, his patience and adult responsibility stretched to their limits, gives Berman a final warning: “I think you’re seriously out of
line here tonight, Mr. Berman. Why don’t you get control of yourself?” The idea of “control,” of course, resonates across a number of plot details, including Hamilton’s attempt to control his smoking. And eventually the remark proves to be ironic. Berman pushes by Hamilton, causing him to step into some “prickly cracking bushes” and then Hamilton lunges at him, pins him, and begins “to pound his head against the lawn” (153). In other words, Hamilton runs amok, and at this moment seems as thoroughly transformed into a ten-year-old boy as Berman. Much as the bully Gary choked Roger, now Hamilton is choking Gary’s father.

More interesting than the fight itself is the aftermath that confirms a pattern of deferred and withheld narratives in “Bicycles, Muscles, Cigaretts.” If, in the initial narrative, the manhandling of the bike is finally displaced by the long awaited fact that the bike is now missing, and the conversation about the bike itself is displaced and overshadowed by the fight, the fight too is eventually overshadowed by the father-son exchanges that follow. Carver appears to be self-consciously staging the question, “What is the real story here?” It may be that Hamilton’s dawning sense of himself as a fluid and transitional figure, both a son and a father, both a child and an adult, turns out to be the real story. However, the real story may also be the natural forward flow, in which narrative and generation must both give way to what comes next, and, thus, the link between the linearity of narrative and generation.

Embarrassed by his loss of control, Hamilton apologizes to Roger, but Roger, it turns out, is fascinated by what he saw: “What if he’d picked up a knife, Dad? Or a club?” (154). Hamilton dismisses this suggestion, but his son presses him into admitting, “It’s hard to say what people will do when they’re angry.” This statement, interestingly,
could apply to Berman or to himself (or even Hamilton’s father, given what we later know about him). Hamilton may realize that he and Berman, whom he declared “out of line,” and he and the boys, now occupy the same moral ground. In an atmosphere of rage, identities have become, to a degree, unsortable. Nonetheless, Roger finds the fight appealing, to the extent that he asks his father, “Let me feel your muscle.” This Hemingway-esque moment reveals that Roger has seen a side of his father that is more like himself and other boys his age than, presumably, he ever has before. Hamilton’s childish outburst, in turn, will eventually provoke in Roger some surprisingly adult insights.

Hamilton speaks briefly with his wife and eventually visits Roger in bed: the boy “was in his pajamas and had a warm fresh smell about him that Hamilton breathed deeply” (155). Smell in this story has previously been associated with cigarettes and it is possible that, in being exposed to the expansive world of his son and re-discovering his own capacity for boyish behavior, Hamilton is now successfully breaking free of his adult addiction. Hamilton briefly reprimands his son about the bike, and though Roger dutifully promises never to let it happen again, he, like the narrative as a whole, is interested in other issues now. It is only when Roger and Hamilton are left alone, towards the end of the story, that the narrative re-focuses a final time from Hamilton considering a synchronic categorization of those around him to a diachronic consideration of where he stands in relation to those who have come before and after him. Roger asks about his grandfather, Hamilton’s father, whom Hamilton himself had just been considering as he sat on the porch. Hamilton recalled how witnessing his father in a fight significantly shaped the way he thought of the man: “It was a bad one, and both men had been
hurt . . . Hamilton had loved his father and could recall many things about him. But now he recalled his father’s one fistfight as if it were all there was to the man” (154). Carver critics agree more or less uniformly that Hamilton fears a kind of reduction of identity at this moment: for Bethea it is the fear Hamilton must feel in being reduced, like his grandfather, to a single depleted memory (82); for Meyer (61), aligning himself with Saltzman (63), the end of the story suggests Evan’s chagrin that the fight will overshadow his otherwise mature handling of the situation.

Now, when Roger asks about the grandfather (“was Grandfather strong like you?”), it is as if he too senses the generational importance of what has just happened. He is similarly concerned with the way in which his grandfather is remembered, not just by himself, but also by his father. He tells his father that he does not want to forget his grandfather, and when Hamilton is silent, Roger enters a strange line of questioning: “When you were young, was it like it is with you and me? Did you love him more than me? Or just the same?” (155) The questions put Hamilton first in the role of the son and then in the role of the father, focusing Carver’s interest on the theme of generational fluidity. Meyer argues that Evan achieves a new understanding of “the passage of generations within a family” (62) that Roger, too, will come to understand with the force of time. The son is now questioning the father—trying to obtain the unknowable narrative that is a more complete version of Hamilton’s identity—and Hamilton realizes that he could easily be reduced, just as he has reduced his own father, to a single incident, this fight with Berman.

With this final consideration of markers of generational identity, “Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarets” now most clearly enters into conversation with Hall’s notion of
deferred identity. Hamilton’s fear of being reduced to a single incident brings him into an awareness of what Hall notes as the necessity of arresting a continuous semiotic flow to make meaning in a given moment. Hamilton fears that his son will no longer see him “in process” but, rather, will ossify his identity around the single incident.

Perhaps sensing that Hamilton is not comfortable in this discussion of feelings, Roger switches to less emotionally charged questions: “Did he smoke? I think I remember a pipe or something” (155). Hamilton says that Roger’s grandfather tried to quit smoking cigarettes a number of times, but was unsuccessful, a fact that, genetically, does not bode well for Hamilton’s own attempt to quit. Hamilton gives Roger the back of his hand to smell, in order to show him the unpleasant effects of smoking, but the smell is gone. Hamilton has discovered, in this moment with his son, that he is past the most difficult part of his effort to quit smoking. Hamilton speculates that the smell was “scared out of me”—another possible benefit of engaging in the fight. In this way, he has traded one manner of losing self-control for another. It is as if a fever, spurred by the fight, has broken and Hamilton has perhaps now beaten his addiction. But the haunting similarities to his own father militate against a permanent sense of optimism.

Before Hamilton leaves, his son engages him in one last speech:

Dad? You’ll think I’m pretty crazy, but I wish I’d known you when you were little. I mean, about as old as I am right now. I don’t know how to say it, but I’m lonesome about it. It’s like—it’s like I miss you already if I think about it now.

That’s pretty crazy, isn’t it? Anyway, please leave the door open. (156)

This is a remarkable utterance for a boy of nine. The word “lonesome” betrays the insight of an adult, and generations once again meld together. Certainly, Roger has seen a
“childish” side of his father earlier that evening, is intrigued by it, and wishes he could know the whole story. Asking his father about when he was younger implies something about Hamilton’s current state: he is somehow less now than he was as a child. Roger “misses” this more robust version of his father that he has glimpsed but never had a chance to know. Carver suggests that our ability to know an identity in process may not always increase with new information but may sometimes also diminish in the face of it. Similarly, Hamilton has gotten a glimpse of the complicated world his son occupies. Neither father nor son, however, is fully willing to provide a narrative—be it a narrative of identity or of past events—for the other: both recognize the limits of complete, unmediated communication, although from different perspectives. Roger’s concealment is the child’s act of self-protection; Hamilton’s is the adult recognition of the futility of trying to know someone completely. Roger has reduced his grandfather to a memory of smoking a pipe and Hamilton has reduced his father to a single fistfight. Hamilton appears to realize the inevitability of this process and that the wise thing for him to do is to try to control those aspects of his life that his son can see. Perhaps it is for this reason that Hamilton does not verbally respond to Roger after he, Roger, struggles—despite worrying that his dad will think he’s crazy—to articulate his insight in words. He wants his father to sympathize with him in their inability to know each other, to apprehend in the other an identity in progress that fades to incompletion both in the past and in the future.

Hamilton’s non-verbal response demonstrates his conflicted sense of inheritance: “Hamilton left the door open, and then he thought better of it and closed it half way” (156). The partial access that he allows Roger quite obviously parallels the restricted
view he grants of his own past. His reaction to his son’s attempt to communicate *about* communication can seem cruel, but it is Hamilton’s way of sympathizing with his son about the incomplete nature of sympathy.
Works Cited


