THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF THE COLLOQUIAL VOICE;
RAYMOND CARVER AND THE MINIMALIST AESTHETIC

Cara Diaconoff

English Honors Thesis
April 17, 1987
In American critical writing of the last decade, the term "minimalism", which first came into use to describe a particular aesthetic, a distinctive style of art, has begun to be used in a very different context. In literary reviews and essays it is now most frequently employed as a convenient critical label, a catch-all phrase which purportedly refers to a new "reigning style" in contemporary fiction. This style in turn is generally thought to be the exclusive domain of a certain generation of writers. Roughly, the birth years of this generation could be said to span the period 1935-50; thus, a collection of its best-known "spokespeople" can include writers of as wide a range of age and background as Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, Richard Ford, and Mary Robison.

The term "minimalism" is now being used as a stylistic category in which to group these writers. Generally speaking, the hallmarks of this style are considered to be an everyday, unadorned narrative voice; a preoccupation with details of domestic life; a cast of characters united by (if nothing else) a sort of common fecklessness; and, finally, an overall mood of anomie. This last generalization is especially significant—for it refers, after all, not so much to a stylistic quality itself as to the psychological effect of certain qualities of style. A story is now termed "minimalist" when the subjective feeling it produces in the reader is one of uncertainty, frustration, lack of resolution. Thus, as a stylistic categorization the term is clearly, in much current critical writing, being very loosely and clumsily applied. As a literary category, it has in current usage lost almost all its
original historical meaning, become merely a fashionable umbrella term, which is as often used to denigrate as simply to describe. It is this denigrating tendency that I find most disturbing about the way the term is presently being used, and which, through a more considered investigation of the historical meaning of the term, I hope to reverse.

On the other hand, to attempt to divest the current use of the term of all validity whatsoever, would be pointless. The fact is that there does exist a style in American fiction today which can be called minimalist. Though as a movement it may have no manifesto, no school, no statement of guiding principles as such, it does have something equally important and equally unifying—the patronage of the New Yorker. The New Yorker is not the only periodical to have given the practitioners of minimalism a home—Esquire, for example, is another equally prestigious and equally welcoming outlet—but it is the most important, by virtue of its sheer mystique if nothing else. The dominance at the New Yorker of a very specific editorial taste may be a part of the foundation of this mystique; in any case, the fact remains that in the past decade a style of short fiction identifiable as "minimalism" has emerged, and that its primary conduit has been the New Yorker.

To acknowledge this connection at the outset seems to me, in view of the magazine’s preeminence in the world of mainstream contemporary fiction, to be of the utmost importance. If we acknowledge the fact of the magazine’s status as a trend-establisher (if not a trend-setter), then we begin to understand
the range of implications of its connection with and promotion of the "new minimalism." What I am trying to say is that this new commercial minimalism has become the style—that is, the style which we would think of first if asked what were the major trends, the unifying characteristics, of American fiction today. Thus, it follows that it is also the style for young writers to emulate.

The only reason that this should be dangerous in and of itself is simply that minimalism is such a deceptively easy style to copy. Because its virtues are those of subtlety and nuance, and yet, also, because the superficial attributes of the style are so easily reproduced, minimalism runs more of a risk than do most literary movements of losing all its redeeming qualities at the hands of imitators. As I see it, this danger has now become a reality. Thus, my desire to attempt, through an examination of the work of Raymond Carver, to put the movement back in perspective—to establish its historical connection with minimalism in the visual arts and in the work of Gertrude Stein and Hemingway, and to reaffirm the value of its present-day contribution to the national literature.

To begin, I ought first to define my key term. With a concept such as minimalism, this becomes more complicated than one might expect. "Minimalism" as an artistic movement and "minimalism" as a style of writing popularized by the New Yorker clearly represent two different ideas. However, in view of the fact that my ultimate aim is to bind the two contextually together, to show how the latter is informed by the former, I
will start by citing the idea which gave the original impetus to the minimalist movement. In the preface to his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty defines phenomenology as the study of essences, "the philosophy which puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting-point other than that of their 'facticity'...It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian or the sociologist may be able to provide."¹ This statement, in fact, is the keystone of the minimalist movement in the visual arts. The idea that there was a need to return to "things themselves," to locate, if possible, "that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks,"² gave rise, beginning in the mid-1960's, to a visual art characterized by simplicity, literalness, and general "blankness." This blankness was accomplished through the use of uninterrupted surfaces and mass fabrication; the aim was that the mark of the artist's hand should be as little apparent as possible. In exhibitions of these works, each room would contain no more than one work; the goal was to confront the spectator with the fact of the object's presence and nothing else, in an attempt to make him more conscious of his own immediate, pre-intellectual understanding of the object. (For examples of works, see Appendix.)

Another important aspect of minimal art was the Duchampian concept of "readymades"—"found" objects which could be presented
as art. Part of the motivation behind this was to deny the existence of absolute artistic values, to deny that it was possible to define what is and is not art. Another motivating factor may well have been the urge to make as blatant as possible the new concern with "the banal, the common, and the everyday," which, as Barbara Rose points out, became so important to the young minimalist artists of the 1960's as the most direct way of revolutionizing people's most common, most ingrained perceptions of things around them. Here the resonances with what we already know of New Yorker minimalism become quite obvious. The preoccupation of these writers with highly mundane subject matter has practically become a cliche. Literary critics make a mistake, however, when they suppose that among minimalist writers there cannot be as wide a range of treatment of this everyday subject matter, as there is among minimalist visual artists. Minimalist writing, too, even at times within the work of the same writer, can range from the trashiness of a Warhol to the haunting elegance of a George Segal.

Finally—in all forms of minimalist activity, repetition has always been an extremely important device. One of its main purposes is to give the illusion, as Gertrude Stein puts it, of a "continuous present," to expand the experience of one moment indefinitely. It can also be used in order to defy the laws of a given art form. Rose quotes the choreographer Yvonne Rainer explaining the excessive use of repetition in one of her dances by saying that she wanted to give an example of how dance could be brought closer to sculpture, which is static, allowing the spectator to walk around it. In a dance, repetition of the same
movement, facing each time in different directions, in effect allows the spectator to "walk around it."\(^5\) Carver's repetition, of course, is really more one of themes, of motifs--the "monotony" of subject matter to which reviewers such as James Atlas refer.\(^5\) While it can have a monotonous quality, I believe the longer-term effect of Carver's brand of thematic repetitiveness is to hone his working of a theme until he has come as close as possible to defining its essence.

Thus, we have established some defining principles of minimalism in general as well as the possibility of a direct connection between the visual-artistic and the contemporary literary branches of the style. The issue I want to address now, especially in relation to Raymond Carver, is that of the literary antecedents for present-day commercial minimalism. Implicit in much criticism of minimalism seems to be the assumption that it encompasses a very new type of narrative voice and stance. In drawing a parallel between "Carverian" minimalism and the work of Stein and Hemingway, I hope to show that the current movement is more interestingly viewed as the latest stage in the century-long development of what Richard Bridgman calls the "colloquial voice" in American fiction.\(^7\)

As Bridgman defines the "colloquial voice" in his beginning overview of its history, it is practically synonymous with our own current idea of the "minimal style." In his Introduction Bridgman summarizes the changes he sees taking place in the American prose style by the end of the nineteenth century. Around this time, he suggests, "writers became increasingly
conscious of the techniques of colloquial writing...These techniques were then stylized to accentuate the following characteristics of colloquial style: a) stress on the individual verbal unit; b) a resulting fragmentation of syntax, and c) the use of repetition to bind and unify.8 These, too, are the essential characteristics of the style we call minimalism. While we may posit other important defining characteristics--those of theme and setting, for example--but we ought to recognize that the essence of minimalism is finally inherent in matters of style.

In order to better understand what factors are indeed intrinsic to present-day--or, for our purposes, Carverian--minimalism, it is necessary to trace the genesis of the style back to those, such as Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway, who first consciously began to develop it. In this discussion I am once again indebted to Bridgman, whose chapters on Stein and Hemingway helped to clarify for me their historical relevance to contemporary trends. As he sees it, Stein’s innovations in the use of the colloquial voice had a profound influence on Hemingway--and thus, we might extrapolate, on those, including Carver, who followed in his tradition. One of her major contributions, according to Bridgman, was to "emphasize the submerged patterns of colloquial prose."9 In the texts covered by Bridgman in his discussion--Things As They Are, Melanctha, The Making of Americans, and Tender Buttons--he sees her as effecting this emphasis through her use of a "carefully restricted vocabulary" and through repetition--both of which devices serve to "point up patterns of language, rhythms, and verbal
As her career progressed, her writing became, in effect, more and more minimalist—that is, more and more concerned simply with the effects of the patterns of the words themselves, regardless of their meaning. It was in *Tender Buttons* that Stein realized this project to its fullest extent. Its structure is that of a collection of portraits of objects, which she "contemplated" and on which she "wrote as she concentrated." As Bridgman points out, her technique works in effect as an "artistic implementation" of Henri Bergson's observation that "'either there is no philosophy possible, and all knowledge of things is a practical knowledge aimed at the profit to be drawn from them, or else philosophy consists in placing oneself within the object itself by an effort of intuition.'" (Emphasis added.) Stein then implemented this idea by "describing her subject without naming it...working around the object...packing the clay of words around it." It is my contention that this quality, this capacity to describe the subject without naming it—in effect, to show it in action—is both the major defining principle and the highest virtue of minimalist writing. The extent to which a minimalist writer is able to do this—"to place himself within the object by an act of intuition"—ought to be the primary criterion of his or her skill.

In his chapter on Hemingway, Bridgman quotes Hemingway himself as having best defined the nature of Stein's influence on him: "'Here it is...better to thank Gertrude for everything I learned from her about the abstract relationship of words. By
this he means, more specifically, her discoveries about "rhythms and the uses of words in repetition." As Bridgman goes on to demonstrate, it was such discoveries which aided Hemingway most in the process of his development of the vernacular as a straight narrative style rather than as a "realistic" device to depict a specific type of character. Indeed, Bridgman defines this essentially as the main problem associated with the process of internalizing the colloquial style. According to his view, if a third-person narrator speaks in a colloquial voice, then many of the same problems arise as if it were a first-person narrator—the attribution to the narrator of a specific personality, the subsequent limitation of point of view, of knowledge, of insight. A story such as "Soldier's Home" explores in particular depth both these problems of point of view and one potential solution. In this story, which includes many passages whose deadpan tone and declarative, repetitive style would seem to mimic the voice of the disenchanted protagonist, the problem which might arise for the author would be, in effect, how to fill two capacities at once. How to be both author and narrator—that is, how to bring in authorial insights, draw authorial connections, without seeming to violate the already-established tone of the colloquial voice?

Indeed, in this particular example Hemingway does not always succeed perfectly. With the paragraph that begins, "Krebs acquired the nausea in regard to experience that is the result of untruth or exaggeration..." comes a break in the heretofore "naive" voice which is slightly jarring. The contrast in voice even between this paragraph and the next one, which begins,
"During this time, it was late summer, he was sleeping late in bed..." is rather striking. The reader, even if unconsciously, is forced to make a choice between the two voices.

However, this break in voice turns out to be only a momentary aberration, for throughout the rest of the story it remains naive, simply declarative—the voice, in effect, of the main character Krebs, who "does not want any consequences ever again." This is a voice which does not appear to admit any consequences, which does not appear to examine any of the implications of what it says. Yet it is evident by the end of the story that what we may think of as Krebs' assumption of that voice—his resolution to avoid "consequences"—in fact cannot help but admit of consequences. The narrator barely refers to them directly; only in the line, "There would be one more scene maybe before he got away" does he give any sign that something important, even emblematic, may have happened. The reader apprehends the importance—or non-importance, as the case may even be—of what has transpired not through any direct comment on it on the part of the narrator, but simply through the description of the events and Krebs' immediate, unconsidered emotional reactions to them. What we would normally think of as the climactic events of the story—Krebs' assertion that he does not love anyone and his subsequent retreat and attempt to placate his mother—are accorded their only real "interpretation" by the narrator in the lines, "He had tried so to keep his life from becoming complicated. Still, none of it had touched him." The remainder of this concluding paragraph, then, appears simply as a
description, an enumeration of the thoughts at that moment running through Krebs' head:

He had felt sorry for his mother and she had made him lie. He would go to Kansas City and get a job and she would feel all right about it. There would be one more scene maybe before he got away. He would not go down to his father's office. He would miss that one. He wanted his life to go smoothly. It had just gotten going that way. Well, that was all over now, anyway. He would go over to the schoolyard and watch Helen play indoor baseball. (p. 77)

On the basis of this list of Krebs' conscious reactions to his current situation, we grasp the significance of the change in his outlook on life, a change which enables him now to hold key people and events in his life as both important and unimportant at the same time. He sees that his life is becoming "complicated" now, and yet at the same time it is not, for none of it really touches him. He tells his mother he loves no one, and yet the story ends with his decision to go watch his sister play baseball, a choice which earlier in the story she had offered him as a way to prove his professed love for her. ("'If you loved me, you'd want to come over and watch me play indoor.'") This vacillation between one set of emotional responses and another, this refusal to make a commitment to any one approach to life--even to make a commitment not to make a commitment, is in fact the subject which Hemingway is here "packing words around," describing without naming.

It ought then to be no surprise that when asked to speak about his influences, one of the first responses that comes to Carver's mind is Hemingway in general and this story in particular. In elements of style and setting Hemingway could essentially be viewed as the first New Yorker minimalist. In his
natural assumption of the colloquial voice as well as his indirect but thorough exploration of the effects of a certain kind of disconnection, he may be seen as typifying the best aspects of the contemporary mainstream style.

We have seen, then, that the very self-conscious minimalist movement in the visual arts is not a phenomenon which is completely unrelated to the perhaps less centralized development in American fiction of the colloquial voice—a development which in fact laid the necessary groundwork for the widespread acceptance of the contemporary style which today we call minimalism. Furthermore, we shall see that the defining characteristics of "classic" minimalism—the blankness of tone, the repetition of themes and motifs, the concern with the ordinary, and the apprehension of the object "from the inside out"—are indeed integral to "Carverian" minimalism as well.

However, the minimalist parallel with Hemingway is not one which most contemporary critics would seem particularly inclined to draw. The ahistorical nature of the style is stressed in some way by almost all critics, whether they are favorably or unfavorably disposed toward it. Furthermore, this perceived "ahistoricity" refers not simply to their view that the style itself has no history, no precedents. The minimalist approach is also seen as resulting in a prose which, within the scope of any given story, does not allow the very characters a history. Michael Gorra, in the "definition" of minimalism which he offers in his review of Cathedral, seems a representative example of the
average contemporary reviewer who finds himself personally disinclined to minimalism. "Carver," he says, "is the chief practitioner of what's been called 'American minimalism,' a mannerist mode in which the intentional poverty, the anorexia, of the writer's style is mimetic of the spiritual poverty of his or her characters' lives, their disconnection from anything like a traditional community. It is a prose so attenuated that it can't support the weight of a past or a future, but only a bare notation of what happens, now; a 'slice of life' in which the characters are seen without the benefit of antecedents or social context." This is probably a good example of what happens when a critic allows his personal negative bias to overcome his more perceptive faculties; he recites the easiest formulation that comes to mind and simply ceases to make sense. The point remains, however, that in his charge of ahistoricity Gorra must be wrong on two counts. Minimalism is not just a currently fashionable "mannerist mode"; its roots lie at least as far back as Hemingway. Nor can it be true that the prose "can't support the weight" of the characters' past or future. Krebs, for example, is the way he is because of his past--both his own very specific one and the more widely shared one of all the men his age who had been sent to war. As for his future--like a great many "slice-of-life" stories, "Soldier's Home" if it is about anything is about its protagonist's future. The central revelation of Krebs' story, the one on which it ends, is of the extreme contingency of the future--but also of its malleability, of his own ability to control it. The best "slice-of-life" stories, after all, are those which take as their "slice" a
moment in a character’s history when the nature of his history—his understanding of his past and its relationship or lack of one to his future—is becoming clearest to him.

In their analytical review of Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?, which appeared in the Spring 1979 issue of the Iowa Review, David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips would seem to corroborate this view of one of the primary uses of minimalism. “Typically, Carver writes about characters whose lives are in suspended animation, verging on disarray: the salesman between jobs, the writer between stories, the student between semesters, the husband or wife between marriages, and the insomniac, caught between waking consciousness and the escape of sleep. Carver’s chosen task is to convey through the most fitting language and symbols the special moments when these people have sudden, astonishing glimpses behind the curtain which separates their empty lives from chaos.”

As Boxer and Phillips see it, one of the transformations which it is necessary for the characters to undergo in order to attain these glimpses is the dissociation of their identities. In such a transformation the character feels as if he had stepped outside himself and is watching himself go through some action without being sure what he will do next. Thus, for example, “Carver places a great number of his characters before mirrors and windows. Mirrors, we know, have the disconcerting capacity of making one a stranger to oneself.” Boxer and Phillips then give several examples of Carver’s use of the mirror motif, including that in the title story, in which Ralph Wyman "attempts to escape the revelation (of his wife’s
infidelity) on an odyssey through the seediest part of town. Drunk, he sees his face in a bar restroom mirror and touches it as if it is something not his, something alien to him. 19

The stories on which I have chosen to concentrate are in fact informed by another typically Carverian motif of dissociation—the visiting stranger. The themes of both "Collectors," from Will You Please..., and "Viewfinder," from What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, revolve around the visit of an unininvited stranger to a man living on his own. In both stories, but especially the first, the visiting character may be seen not as a separate personality at all, but as a projection of one facet of the narrator’s personality. Thus, we may say that in each of these stories Carver is presenting a situation which in effect concretizes, makes tangible, the sense of dissociation from self experienced by almost all his characters.

What further distinguishes the sense of dissociation depicted in these two stories is the extent to which it is motivated by guilt. Guilt is admittedly a common theme of Carver’s, but it does not commonly take on the specifically threatening cast which it does in these two stories. The fact that in these stories the guilt is personified as a stranger strikes me as very important. The shadowy, intrusive stranger who seems to know more about the main character than he does himself has become a staple character in twentieth-century fiction. In its present-day incarnation it can be traced back most famously to Kafka— one thinks particularly of the central situation of The Trial—and, in American literature, to Flannery
O'Connor's knowing, menacing strangers in such stories as "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and "Good Country People." On one level, then, the interpretation of the intruders in "Collectors" and "Viewfinder" as guilt personified allows us to read them as genre stories; in addition to the minimalist tradition inherited from Hemingway, these stories emerge as part of a larger thematic tradition reflecting the whole history of our era's preoccupation with individual guilt.

If these are "genre" stories about guilt, then they have profound significance on another, more personal level as well. The plural of the title "Collectors," for example, suggests that the intruder Aubrey Bell may actually be the last in a long series of "collectors" who have recently visited the main character--and indeed, his rooms, as he describes them, are remarkably empty. Repossession is a familiar theme throughout Carver's fiction and poetry and indeed throughout much of his life. During his twenties and thirties, before he began to find a great deal of success as a writer, he and his family were continually short of funds, and more than once bankrupt. The guilt of the main character in "Collectors," then, would be very familiar to Carver, would likely carry a great deal of personal significance for him. Similarly, the devastation of the narrator in "Viewfinder" corresponds closely to what we know of events in Carver's own life--for example, his estrangement from his wife and family during the worst period of his alcoholism. Viewed in this light, then, we begin to see that what is really remarkable about these stories is just the way in which Carver is able to
shape the recounting of a highly personal experience so that it reflects a universally resonant theme.

Having then granted all this, where does this leave us in relation to Carver's choice of a minimalist style? Can we suggest that his use of minimalism helps him particularly in the transformation of some segment of his personal life into a story, in ways in which another style would not? The answer to this would seem to be yes; but what is more interesting than the simple answer is the process by which Carver himself arrives at it. I would like to suggest that one way to read both "Collectors" and "Viewfinder" is as records of that process. These stories could in effect be seen as metamimimalist. In them, Carver could be seen to be commenting on the uses of minimalism--its advantages and disadvantages as a tool in the attainment of his chosen goal--to transform intensely personal experience into a universally relevant, a "moral" work of art.

*What We Talk About...*, the collection in which "Viewfinder" appears, is commonly considered to be Carver's most purely minimalist body of work. Indeed, the stories in this collection are the shortest, the narrowest in their range of events, their language the most pared-down, of any in Carver's opus. If we grant that *What We Talk About...* represents the "pinnacle" of Carverian minimalism, then the first collection, *Will You Please...*, can be seen as a harbinger of minimalist feats to come. In this first collection, Carver could be seen as experimenting with the form, testing it, at times taking it to extremes. He has not yet gained the full mastery of the style which will be his to exert in *What We Talk About...*. In effect,
the minimalist stories in *Will You Please...* appear as exercises in minimalism, whereas those in *What We Talk About...* are full-fledged minimalist products. Certainly, a comparison of the two stories with which we are concerned here seems to bear out such a formulation.

"Collectors" begins in a style so flat and devoid of narrative commentary as to be almost a self-parody. The situation of the main character is typically Carverian: I was out of work. But any day I expected to hear from up north. I lay on the sofa and listened to the rain. Now and then I'd lift up and look through the curtain for the mailman. (p. 100)

However, it soon becomes clear that something else is afoot here. Already, we see that this is a more "minimalistic" opening scene than most others in this collection. No background whatsoever is given on the main character: instead, a whole page is devoted to the action of the sudden knock on the door and the main character's reaction to it. This expansion of a moment in time creates a sense of foreboding and suspicion on the part of the main character, a sense of suspicion which we may already begin to feel stems from some sort of feeling of guilt. The narrator is clearly nervous; every small event seems to him an evil portent, a "bad sign":

You can't be too careful if you're out of work and you get notices in the mail or else pushed under your door...

The knock sounded again, louder, a bad sign. I eased up and tried to see onto the porch. But whoever was there was standing against the door, another bad sign. (p. 100)

It is at the point when the narrator actually meets Bell,
the intruder, that Carver introduces the first in a series of
details which function as "indeterminacies," upsetting in some
degree the reader's preconceived subconscious expectations. The
effect of this "upsetting" or confusion of the reader is to break
his concentration on the actual events of the story and draw his
attention more specifically to the way the story is being told.
The first of these "indeterminacies" occurs when Bell, still
standing on the doorstep, lets out a sneeze. The narrator then
opens the door to find "an old guy, fat and bulky under his
raincoat." For an intruder, he appears surprisingly vulnerable--
old, fat, and possibly ill. The reader is thrown off guard;
Bell does not fit the prototype of the intruder-cum-incarnation
of guilty conscience.

In degree of presumption, however, he does fit this
prototype. We get the first real instance of this presumption
when he takes off his hat while he is still standing on the
doorstep and slaps it against his coat "as if that were it,
everything had been settled, the drive finished, the railhead
reached." As well as being an example of Bell's presumption,
this is also in effect another indeterminacy. With the enigmatic
phrases, "the drive finished, the railhead reached," the reader
may well feel as if the main character himself has some
foreknowledge of something important about to happen. In stories
told in the first person, a distinction is usually implied between
the narrator, who is recounting the story with the knowledge of
hindsight, and the protagonist--even if it is the same person as
the narrator--to whom the story is in effect actually happening.
In a story such as "Collectors," in which there is no introductory
commentary from the narrator, no indication that the story is being
told from the point of view of an older and more knowing protagonist
who is consciously looking back into his memory to recount some past
significant event, the subconscious assumption of the reader is
that he is being told the story, in effect, as it is happening.
But with a phrase such as "as if that were it, everything had
been settled, the drive finished, the railhead reached," the
narrator/protagonist suggests that he has already sensed, before
the events of the story have even really started, that he is in
for a conflict with Bell, and that it is one which Bell will
probably win. At this point in the story, the reader may well
have sensed this too, but the implication that the protagonist
knows as much as the reader is still jarring.

These indeterminacies, or surprises for the reader, appear
on one hand as simply part of Carver's general experimentation
with conventions of the reader-author-narrator relationship. On
another level, though, one may interpret them as manifestations
of his experimenting with minimalist extremes. One pitfall to
which minimalist writing is prone is over-reticence--the danger
that the reader will in fact not be given enough information to
make the telling worthwhile. Indeed, this is one of the most
common general complaints about the style, though, admittedly,
it is usually made by critics, such as Atlas and Gorra, who are
already prejudiced against it anyway. Carver, however, by
seeming in "Collectors" to be withholding information on purpose,
is in effect "playing" minimalist with a vengeance. It is as if
he is daring the reader to continue, daring him to find that the
story was worth telling after all, despite the latter's sense throughout that he was being deprived of important information.

In fact, as the story progresses it becomes apparent that it is the very mysteriousness of its context which gives it its strength. If the source of the narrator's guilt is mysterious, then our identification with him will clearly be that much stronger. The indeterminacies, the gaps in the reader's knowledge, turn this story into a quite masterful study in guilt. It is the pervasive nature of this guilt which is remarkable; naturally, one would expect a person in the protagonist's situation--unemployed, destitute--to feel guilty, but one would normally expect the feeling to be directed against himself only on behalf of himself and of those who are most closely affected by his unemployed status--his family, for example, if he has one. But in this story, the guilt as personified by Aubrey Bell is larger than this; in fact, in its magnitude it appears almost to be the consequence of a crime committed against the whole of society. Bell seems continually on the verge of a full indictment of the main character; he seems to hint at some mysterious "crime" when he "hisses": "Are you speaking for Mrs. Slater?", and later, while he is vacuuming the empty rooms:

Rilke lived in one castle after another, all of his adult life. Benefactors, he said loudly over the hum of the vacuum. He seldom rode in motorcars; he preferred trains. Then look at Voltaire at Cirey with Madame Chatelet. His death mask. Such serenity. He raised his right hand as if I were about to disagree. No, no, it isn't right, is it? Don't say it. But who knows? (p.104)

Though this speech may appear at first as a reassurance of the protagonist--the analogy of his destitute situation with those of
famous authors—or as a friendly suggestion—get yourself a
benefactor, or a mistress—by its end it is apparent that it is
really one more attempted goad against the protagonist’s
conscience. The fact that it is very much a performance on
Bell’s part is signalled most clearly by the fact that he “raises
his right hand” as if the protagonist is “about to disagree,”
although evidently he is not. Bell is merely playing at being
reassuring; in reality, he is taking his opportunity once again
to remind the protagonist of his sins.

The aura of guilt surrounding the protagonist is also
evidenced by the incipient streak of cruelty, the affinity for
violence, which he is shown to possess. In particular, this is
suggested by the lines on p. 105: “I got up and took hold of two
corners of the pillow. I felt I was holding something by the
ears.” This image is made slightly horrible by the very
disingenuousness of the character, his unreflectiveness as he
simply does what he is told to do. It is, in addition, one of
the few hints we are ever given in the story of just what is the
source of the narrator’s guilt. This passage suggests, albeit
indirectly, the capability of the narrator for unwitting cruelty,
the ability to hurt. It is notable, too, that this capability of
violence is in fact referred to so fleetingly. It is another
instance of Carver’s hyper-minimalism in this story, that such a
central theme is outlined so indirectly, so much by nuance.

As if in response to these probably unconscious tendencies
toward cruelty in the protagonist, Bell plays the vulnerable role
for all it is worth. It is significant that he is again
described in vulnerable terms at the very moment when the
protagonist must needs, finally, to assert himself, to take some positive action. This is the point when he sees the letter—the letter which may or may not be the one for which he has been waiting, the one which will determine his immediate future—lying on the floor by the mail slot. Now, Bell is ready for his final demonstration. He overturns an ashtray on the carpet and proceeds to vacuum up the mess:

He got down on his knees again and inserted a new filter. He took off his jacket and threw it onto the sofa. He was sweating under the arms. Fat hung over his belt. (p. 106)

The language of this description recalls to us our first image of Bell as potential victim—the sweating, crazy "fat and bulky" Bell of the first scene. It is now, when he appears weakest, that he in reality holds most power over the protagonist: "Twice I started for the letter. But he seemed to anticipate me, cut me off, so to speak, with his hose and his pipes and his sweeping and his sweeping..."

One explanation for why Bell is able to take such advantage of the protagonist even when he is at his weakest, is that along with "the little bits" of himself, "the flakes of this and that," that he has collected from the protagonist, he has as well collected the protagonist's very identity. In a somewhat allegorical interpretation, if Bell represents the protagonist's guilt, then that guilt has now overtaken the character's personality to such an extent that it has removed from him all his identity, all his will. At the end, as he watches Bell pocket the letter, he appears apologetic, almost abject. "You're sure that's who the letter's for?" he says when Bell tells him,
"It's for a Mr. Slater." Of course, the reader is never sure whether the main character is Mr. Slater or not, but at least it seems clear at this point that if he ever had been Mr. Slater, he no longer is now. Bell has robbed him of all possibility of having an identity—both in the reader's mind as well as his own.

If Bell's function in the story is to be the personification of the narrator's guilt, the narrator's goading conscience, then on a metafictive level he could also in a very literal sense represent Carver's view of the type of writer he saw himself potentially becoming. Bell's project—his vacuuming—aims at stripping away from the narrator and his surroundings anything which could possibly distract the narrator from the simple, blunt fact of his guilt. This stripping-away, this process of honing, bears much resemblance to the typical procedure of a minimalist writer. The sparseness of the setting, too, mirrors the sparseness of the prose; Carver is taking the style to an extreme on as many levels as possible. His emphasis on a minimalist technique and setting in this piece is so strong that it seems he must be making a comment on it. The gist of that comment is, however, rather vague. He gives not indication in this story that he either embraces or rejects the style; he is simply experimenting, seeing how far he can take it. --In "Viewfinder," as we shall see, his comment on his own method is much clearer.

Like Aubrey Bell, the stranger in "Viewfinder" has a gimmick—he wants to sell the narrator a photograph he has just taken of the latter's house. In a way, this is of course the opposite of Bell's ploy; instead of wanting to remove all vestiges
of the narrator’s former identity, the photographer wants to freeze the present moment in time and leave it as a memento for the narrator. “So why would I want a photograph of this tragedy?” the narrator wonders. In a way, then, this photographer is actually crueler than Bell, who in taking everything away from his “victim,” even possibly the letter which could have proved so important to him, at least left him free potentially to build a new identity. The photographer, while he himself may not be a projection of the narrator’s guilt, wants to leave behind a picture which, as a reminder of the narrator’s loneliness, will serve as a constant source of guilt itself.

The tacit threat which the photographer poses for the narrator in “Viewfinder” is made manifest by the hooks he wears in place of hands. He will not tell the narrator at first how he lost his hands; only later does he hint that it was his children, now gone, who were the cause of the accident: “…Hey, I had kids once. Just like you…They’re what gave me this.” In fact, throughout the second half of the story, “kids are referred to both as a menace and as something loved, something to be missed when they are gone. On p. 13 three separate sets of “kids” are mentioned: the group of three who had previously come by the narrator’s house wanting to paint his address on the curb; the kids the photographer once had; and, in oblique references, the kids which the narrator presumably once had and lost. In effect, these three sets of kids become conflated in the narrator’s consciousness so that by the end they seem to have become one and the same. This confusion—or conflation—begins with the dialogue on p. 13:
"I was in the kitchen," I said. "Usually I’m in
the back."
"Happens all the time," he said. "So they just up
and left you, right? Now you take me, I work alone.
So what do you say? You want the picture?"

On the next page, the two of them appear to be vying for the
honor of having the kids who caused the most pain:

"Jesus," he said... "Sure," he said. "Now you’re
talking."
I said, "The whole kit and kaboodle. They cleared
right out."
"Look at this!" the man said, and again he held up
his hooks. (p. 14)

In the last scene, the confusion in the narrator’s mind of his
own kids with all kids culminates in his discovery on the roof of
the "little rock nest" on the screen over the chimney hole. "You
know kids," he says. "You know how they lob them up, thinking to
sink one down your chimney." In his consciousness, the kids who
made the rock nest, the kids who wanted a dollar to paint his
address on the curb, and his own lost children combine to become
the same vaguely imagined set of troublemakers. Thus, the
frustration which he is attempting to vent in hurling the rocks
and having his picture taken while doing so is aimed as much
against his own lost family as it is toward all pester ing kids.
After all, it is his own children for whom he imagines the
photographs being taken; in some obscure way he hopes that they
will one day be able to see them, to see the extent to which they
have reduced him. The photographer immediately understands the
narrator’s motives in demanding that more pictures be taken of
him and his house: "'It won’t work,'" he says. "'They’re not
coming back.'"
From a simply comparative point of view it is easy enough to give credence to the generally accepted notion that *What We Talk About...* is Carver's most minimalist collection. Stories in this collection which appear in different versions elsewhere--"Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit," "The Bath," "So Much Water So Close to Home," and "Everything Stuck to Him"--show most clearly the effects of the extreme paring-down, the deliberate streamlining, which characterized Carver's revision process at this stage of his career. Minimalism had by this point really become his native style; he had made it suit his voice and artistic temperament perfectly. In "Viewfinder" he has sufficiently integrated the minimalist approach so that he does not find so much need to comment on it, or to carry it to an extreme by withholding information which the reader might have found important. As a story, it is told much more directly, more logically, than is "Collectors." For example, a line such as the one on p. 12, "I'd been watching from the window, you see," which addresses the reader directly and fills a possible gap in his understanding, could never have appeared in "Collectors."

Still, there *is* a meta-artistic element in "Viewfinder," though it is stated more thematically than stylistically as is the case in "Collectors." As in "Collectors," though, the metafictive statement is reflected in the "gimmick" of the visiting stranger. We may say that the apparently sympathetic but still profit-oriented photographer with his hooks and his mechanical reproduction of personal "tragedies" represents our culture's matter-of-fact method of processing domestic sorrow and upheaval. But who specifically in this culture does the
photographer represent? I think one conceivable interpretation could posit the photographer as the contemporary American minimalist writer himself, who in effect takes verbal "photographs" of the deceptively orderly outer shells of people's painful or confused lives and transforms them into equally orderly stories. As the narrator describes it, the picture with which the photographer presents him depicts:

...a little rectangle of lawn, the driveway, the carport, front steps, bay window, and the window I'd been watching from in the kitchen.
So why would I want a photograph of this tragedy?
I locked a little closer and saw my head, my head, in there inside the kitchen window.
It made me think, seeing myself like that. I can tell you, it makes a man think. (p. 12)

The writer, dissociated himself from society by virtue of his profession if nothing else (in this story the dissociation is represented by the hooks for hands, which both bespeak some past tragedy in the man's life and serve to make him visibly physically different from the rest of society) takes advantage of his situation to travel about transcribing the vicissitudes of others' lives:

"I work alone," he said. "Always have, always will..."

"...Me, I keep a room downtown. It's okay. I take a bus out, and after I've worked the neighborhoods, I go to another downtown. You see what I'm saying?..."

The artifact which he finally produces--the photograph, the story--is small, simple, unassuming. Yet it contains some disturbing element--in this case, the head in the window--which is powerful enough to make the receiver of the artifact--here, the narrator--want more. In their spareness, their orderliness,
and at the same time their close reflection of their readers’ lives, the photograph—and minimalist stories—offer the reader a kind of reassurance, a vision of possible order within chaos. Yet even at their best, there is a static quality about them which is ultimately frustrating. "I don’t do motion shots," says the photographer, and indeed, it is at the point where the action begins to become physical, full of motion, that Carver’s story ends. There is something in the minimalist aesthetic which seems to preclude any possible final resolution of a conflict, especially a resolution through some direct, physical means. Paradoxically, the stories have a neatness and an elegance in depicting real life which never actually inheres in real life—and yet, just as in real life, their events and conflicts are never fully resolved.

The frustration which this paradox entails, then, can be seen as the metafictional theme of "Viewfinder." If one wanted to carry the allegorical interpretation even further, one could even suggest that this story, appearing as it does in Carver’s most "minimalist" collection, could be viewed as a watershed piece, a harbinger of his imminent move away from pure minimalism. In view of such an interpretation, it is ironic that "Viewfinder itself in fact works so perfectly as a minimalist allegory. One of the reasons it does so may well be that it is in fact an allegory; it is not, in the normal sense of the phrase, a piece of domestic realism.

The stories in Cathedral, Carver’s third story collection, are in fact, for the most part, pieces of domestic realism. Yet at the same time, they bear witness to the hypothesis that, after
the success of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, Carver was beginning to feel the urge to move away from pure minimalism. It is a decidedly transitional collection; one has the feeling, reading it, that although Carver has definitely departed from a purely minimalist aesthetic, his stylistic destination is nowhere near so certain. The narrative voices in *Cathedral* are marked by a greater degree of introspectiveness and greater sentiment than was generally the case in either of the first two collections. These are not flaws in and of themselves; what causes them to appear so is the new "aura" with which the pieces have now been invested. These are stories told with a great deal of skill, a great deal of finish. Still, somehow they are less interesting than any in either of the first two collections. Domestic realism has, in fact, become too easy for Carver. Ironically, though, it is these stories which are generally considered prime exempla of contemporary minimalism; Gorra’s definition of the term, for example, appears in a review of *Cathedral*. And it is this type of "minimalist" story which is now being copied so widely by writers who still find a home in the *New Yorker*.

A brief look at one story, "Chef's House," will illustrate what I mean about the facile quality of Carver’s immediate post-minimalist work. In its length—it is just under six pages long—and style—the sentences are short and much of the story is told by way of dialogue—it qualifies generally as "minimalist." Thematically, it is familiar Carver material: A woman who still loves her divorced alcoholic husband moves into a rented country house with him for the summer; their idyll is interrupted by the
house's owner, himself a recovering alcoholic, informing them that his daughter now needs the house for herself and her child. For six pages, this is actually a rather complicated plot which covers a long span of time--and in fact, one of the major problems with the story is the run-on style of its paragraph structure. To excerpt from the opening two paragraphs:

That summer Wes rented a furnished house north of Eureka from a recovered alcoholic named Chef. Then he called to ask me to forget what I had going and to move up there and live with him. He said he was on the wagon. I knew about that wagon. But he wouldn't take no for an answer... A week later he called again and said, Are you coming? I said I was still thinking. He said, We'll start over. I said, If I come up there, I want you to do something for me. Name it, Wes said. I said, I want you to try and be the Wes I used to know...

...When I made up my mind to go with Wes, I had to say goodbye to my friend. My friend said, You're making a mistake. He said, Don't do this to me. What about us? he said. I said, I have to do it for Wes' sake... He said, What about me?... Don't come back, he said. (pp.37-8)

This passage has all the right superficial minimalist effects--for example, the repetition of the word "said" and of key words in one phrase after another--but in fact it has missed the spirit of minimalism altogether. For one thing, nothing here is being left out. As much information as possible is being crowded into these "run-on paragraphs," so that nothing is left to the reader's speculation. The ideas being expressed by this simple language are just as simple as that language; they do not suggest any others in their turn. In other words, this language really does comprise only one layer of meaning; to use Gorra's term, it is "anorexic."

The mistake that critics like Gorra and James Atlas make, of course, is in believing that this "anorexia" of
language is minimalist by definition. It is my contention that this type of poverty of language represents minimalism at its worst, not minimalism by definition. This is the type of "minimalism" which, in effect, rolls off the pen. It is easy to imitate, and thus it has given rise to a legion of young imitators--writers such as Peter Cameron and David Leavitt, who are undeniably talented but who can really be said to be wasting their talents in practicing "second-generation minimalism", or even, "post-Carverian minimalism." With "easy" stories such as "Chef's House," Carver in fact helped pave the way for these inferior new imitators.

To illustrate more specifically what I mean by referring to this "easy" new minimalism, let me take as an example a piece by one of its primary purveyors, Peter Cameron. His "Odd Jobs," which appeared in a January 1986 issue of the New Yorker, serves as a good example of the type of deftly written and entertaining but essentially tame story which is currently being referred to as "minimalist." The story concerns the developing family dynamic between an unmarried couple and the man's 7-year-old daughter. The couple--Keith and the first-person narrator--have been together two years; their relationship seems secure enough, but the woman worries that it will not last, senses a lack of commitment on the part of the man. She is essentially--and rather frighteningly--passive; "...I was afraid to change my life," she explains toward the end, "because I didn't expect Keith to marry me, or even love me forever." The opening phrase, "My lover Keith," thus carries a certain amount of ironic significance. While she clearly cannot refer to him as, for
example, her husband or her fiance, there is no societal norm
which would prohibit her from calling him her boyfriend, but she
cannot even bring herself to imply that much commitment. All she
knows for sure is that he is indeed her lover.

The first problem that such a story will naturally encounter
will inevitably be the timeliness of its subject. The first
paragraph brings us the gist of it--the young family, broken up,
probably by divorce (the suspicion is confirmed when the ex-wife
is introduced), the problematic relationship of the new
girlfriend and the pseudo-stepchild. The other timely subject,
which is clearly bound up with the first one, is the insecurity,
the lack of commitment, of love-relationships in this age of
emotional upheaval brought on by the sexual revolution, women’s
liberation, and societal acceptance of divorce. This is not to
imply that such “timely” subjects ought to be off-limits for
contemporary fiction; the vast majority of Raymond Carver’s
stories, after all, are in some way “about,” or at least refer
to, relationship crises of one kind or another, usually marital.
The difference between a typical Carver story of marital
insecurity and “Odd Jobs,” is that in the Carver story the
“timeliness,” or familiarity of the subject does not overshadow
the characterization. The references to the larger theme do not
even necessarily have to be as oblique as those in “Collectors”
or “Viewfinder,” the point is that the characters must be
convincing as well as sympathetic, and Carver’s, for the most
part, are.

Keith, Violet, the ex-wife Judith, and the narrator of “Odd
Jobs" are not unbelievable characters; pains have in fact been taken to make them realistic, and they are recognizable types. The problem is that they are not much else. Judith is an anthropologist, a typically bitchy "intellectual woman" type who cheetises the narrator for tolerating the suburbs and delivers a not-too-subtle put-down of the narrator's "work" (the narrator runs a travel agency.) Keith is "one of those unnervingly beautiful men: slim-hipped, full-lipped," a playwright who used to support himself by odd jobs and who is so leery of "pressure" that he can only eat ice cream outside in winter, when he does not have to worry about it melting too quickly. While this last detail, and many others, are amusing and "telling," they do not really go very far toward making the characters interesting, the details seem contrived; in the end, all they really serve to do is to make the characters variations on a type.

The label "minimalist," though it generally applied to Cameron, really in the end seems a misnomer. The "minimalism" of "Odd Jobs," in fact, is one of theme, setting, and "attitude," but not of style, and not of essence. It is set in the suburbs, it treats of ordinary people with familiar problems, and its diction is simple and colloquial; it has thematic and superficial prerequisites for minimalism, but its impact is weakened by its very a-minimalistic, cluttered style. The essence of minimalism—the exploration of the object or situation "from the inside out"—is completely missing here. Reading this story, we are looking as never before from the outside in; as characters they seem ultimately artificial, and our motivation to care about them
must finally be contrived. The control and restraint that characterizes most of Carver's work seems no longer to be the model for Cameron and other mainstream writers; instead, they seem to take their cue from his inferior work, indulging themselves in long narrative explanations, lists of extraneous detail, and characters defined only by their occupations or their societal roles.

In 1983, the same year in which Cathedral appeared, Carver also published Fires, a book of essays and revisions of stories and poems. The appearance of Fires marked the attainment of a plateau in his career. For one thing, the fact that there is considered to be a market for a book of his essays and revisions, stands as testimony of some sort to the degree of national status he has achieved as a writer. It would seem as well to be an indication that he has now attained a measure of renown and an opportunity for leisure which would permit and encourage—if not in fact oblige him—to take stock of his career. In fact, for the past four years it seems this is precisely what he has been doing. As a writer he has a range of choices; one of them would be to continue producing pieces in the "minimalist-domestic-realistc" style which he helped to make so popular. To this end, he has in past year published a few fairly forgettable stories in the New Yorker and one particularly memorable one in Esquire entitled "Intimacy." The latter recounts, in a very autobiographical-sounding narrative voice, the story of a well-known writer's surprise visit to his former wife, whom he has not seen in four years. In true minimalist fashion, it is narrated
in the present tense and appears for the most part as a direct transcription of her speech. The theme of marital failure seems to take on more and more emotional significance for Carver the older he gets, and nowhere does he treat it more directly, more bluntly, than in this story. This one encounter between the writer and his wife becomes emblematic of their whole relationship--and even of doomed marriages in general. It is a very minimalist piece and one of his most powerful.

The success of a story such as "Intimacy" suggests that minimalism as a stylistic option has not lost all its validity for Carver. When it is chosen carefully, when it matches the aimed-for theme, setting, and mood of a piece--as it does in "Intimacy"--it can still carry a great deal of impact. The problem with the way the style is being employed today is that it is not being chosen carefully. It is being chosen because it is easy--easy to read, easy to write, easier to sell, perhaps, than many other styles. Even in good writers like Mary Robison, Ann Beattie, and Bobbie Ann Mason the style has been commercialized and trivialized, has become deliberately, desperately boring. 1987-style minimalism seems for the most part to bear no connection to Hemingway or Stein or epiphanies of perception. Only in rare cases--such as "Intimacy"--does it even include any element of genuine emotion. Unfortunately, it is a style which evidently still such enjoys widespread popular success that it is yet in no danger of dying out. In the face, then, of such stagnation in the current literary mainstream, it has become more imperative than ever now to look to alternative outlets for any sign of the next major innovations in American writing.
FOOTNOTES


2Merleau-Ponty, ix.


4I have chosen to focus on the reviewers James Atlas and Michael Gorra as two representative examples of this type of criticism.

5Rose, 290.


8Bridgman, 12.

9Bridgman, 194.

10Bridgman, 176.

11Bridgman, 189.

12Bridgman, 189.

13Bridgman, 199.

14Bridgman, 204-08.

15Page numbers refer to Hemingway’s *In Our Time* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1925)


19Boxer and Phillips, 77.

20Simpson, 201.

21Page numbers refer to Raymond Carver, *Will You Please Be


BIBLIOGRAPHY


READING LIST

Cameron, Peter.  One Way Or Another.

Carver, Raymond.  Fires.

Carver, Raymond.  What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.

Hemingway, Ernest.  In Our Time.

Robison, Mary.  Days.

Stein, Gertrude.  Tender Buttons.
Abstract Expressionism, or the legendary Mr. Pure, who finally created an art so pure it consisted of injecting a clear fluid into foam rubber. His dicta, as arcane as they may have sounded when first handed down from the scriptorium, have become nearly canonical for the young artists. Suddenly, his wry irony, aloofness, independence, and ideas about the proper use and role of art, which he has stubbornly held to be noncommercial and nonutilitarian, are precisely the qualities the young admire. It is hard to say how much Reinhardt’s constant theorizing, dogmatizing, and propagandizing actually helped to change the climate and to shift the focus from an overtly romantic style to a covertly romantic style.

Of course Reinhardt’s “purity” is a relative matter, too. The loftiness is ultimately only part of the statement; and as he made of impersonality one of the most easily recognized styles in New York, so the new blandness is likely to result in similarly easy identification, despite all the use of standard units and programmatic suppression of individuality. In some ways, it might be interesting to compare Reinhardt with the younger artists. To begin with, in Reinhardt’s case, there is no doubt that his is classic art (with mystical overtones, perhaps), and there is no doubt that it is abstract, or more precisely that it is abstract painting. Both the concepts of a classical style, toward which an art based on geometry would naturally tend, and that of a genuinely abstract style, are called into question frequently by the ambiguous art of the younger artists. First of all, many use a quirky asymmetry and deliberately bizarre scale to subvert any purist or classical interpretations, whereas others tend to make both paintings and sculptures look so much like plaques or boxes that there is always the possibility that they will be mistaken for something other than art. Their leaving open this possibility is, I think, frequently deliberate.

A Rose Is a Rose Is a Rose: Repetition as Rhythmic Structuring

"the kind of invention that is necessary to make a general scheme is limited in everybody's experience, every time one of the hundreds of times a newspaper man makes fun of my writing and of my repetition he always has the same theme, that is, if you like, repetition, that is if you like the repeating that is the same thing, but once started expressing this thing, expressing any thing there can be