

Keeping the Reader in the House: American Minimalism, Literary Impressionism, and Raymond Carver's "Cathedral"

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American Literary Minimalism is an important yet largely misunderstood movement. Even though a number of scholars have attempted to describe the mode, it remains poorly defined. Part of the problem is that the roots of the tradition have not been thoroughly explored. The aim of this essay is to examine how Literary Impressionism, a style practiced by authors such as Anton Chekhov and Stephen Crane near the turn of the century, shaped the aesthetic of one of the most prominent practitioners of American Minimalism, Raymond Carver. "Cathedral," perhaps Carver's most important short story, illustrates the nexus between the modes. The unnamed narrator objectively reports past sensory experiences, an action common in Impressionistic works, but like many Minimalist protagonists is ultimately unable to articulate the significance of the events he describes.

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In a recent interview, Anne Beattie is asked how she felt about being "classed as a minimalist." She begins her response by saying that "none of us have ever known what that means" and then mentions Raymond Carver's distaste for the term. Despite her initial hesitancy to expound, however, Beattie then goes on to offer a series of thoughtful observations about the topic, many of which show that it is perhaps not as nebulous an idea as she first says. Beattie declares that "minimalism resides in certain omissions," and she discusses Carver's "Are These Actual Miles?" as an example of how the creation of such omissions generates significant implication. Important occurrences are left out because the protagonist is not physically present to experience them; the narrator objectively recounts only selective sensorial details and thus limits what is known. Beattie maintains that "Actual Miles" is a story in which Carver "keeps the reader in the house," closing off any knowledge of what is going on in the outside world (82–83).

Beattie's answer suggests that even though there are a number of studies on Minimalism,¹ little is understood about what it is or how it developed. Confusion about the category largely stems from a murky conception of its origins. Cynthia Whitney Hallett, James Dishon McDermott, and John Barth conclude that it begins in earnest after 1950, but it is in fact an extension of aesthetics established by a diverse group of authors active in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The stories and novels published in the 1980s were not, as Kim Herzinger asserted in 1985, part of a "new fiction" but represented a continuation of an important literary tradition. The first works central to the development of American Minimalism begin to appear around 1890. Kate Chopin's "Story of An Hour" (1894), for example, shares a number of stylistic similarities with the most elliptical works of Carver and Ernest Hemingway. The Imagists, a group that formed less than two decades after the publication of "The Story," establish a set of aesthetic guidelines that call for precision and austerity, two of the primary tenets of the mode.² Imagism is in many ways a corollary of a tradition called Literary Impressionism, a movement that includes writers such as Hamlin Garland, Joseph Conrad, Stephen Crane, Henry James, and Anton Chekhov. Carver's tendency to place narrow epistemic parameters upon his characters is a technique he likely learns from Chekhov and Hemingway, both of whom he openly acknowledges as influences.³ Placed within its proper historical context, American Minimalism, of which Carver is an important part, is a descendent of Literary Impressionism. Perhaps more than any of his stories, Carver's "Cathedral" demonstrates the connection between the two modes and thus offers insight into the defining characteristics of each.

Despite his admiration for Hemingway and Chekhov, the debate over whether Carver is a devotee of austere fiction throughout his career continues. Adam Meyer argued that "Carver's membership in the minimalist fraternity has never been fully established" and that his second collection of stories, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, is more sparse than *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* and *Cathedral* (239). In other words, Meyer maintained that Carver is only briefly a Minimalist.

Recent revelations have complicated Meyer's analysis, however. William L. Stull and Maureen P. Carroll, editors of a collection of Carver's work for The Library of America, suggest that the author's long-time editor Gordon Lish was primarily responsible for the elliptical quality of *What We Talk About*.⁴ Their implicit assertion seems to be that Carver is not a Minimalist but has been cast as such because of Lish's penchant for cutting material. Lish's influence fades, however. Biographer Carol Sklenicka describes how Carver is more protective of *Cathedral* and did not allow his editor free rein (398). Stull and Carroll write that "Carver's trust in Lish had been eroded" (984) by the time of the later work, so Carver is more assertive about upholding the integrity of his narratives as they are edited for inclusion in *Cathedral*. For this reason, the tales that comprise the book are presumably more reflective of Carver's "true" aesthetic.

Although the tales in *Cathedral* are more “generous” than many of Carver’s other works, particularly those over which Lish asserted editorial dominance, each story in the collection nonetheless reflects the central attributes of American Minimalist fiction.⁵ The core idea that differentiates the mode from other movements is that prose and poetry should be extremely efficient, allusive, and implicative. It is defined by form, not by content. The language in this type of fiction tends to be simple and direct. Narrators do not often use ornate adjectives and rarely offer effusive descriptions of scenery or extensive detail about characters’ backgrounds. Because authors tend to use few words, each is invested with a heightened sense of interpretive significance. Allusion and implication by omission are often employed as a means to compensate for limited exposition, to add depth to stories that on the surface may seem superficial or incomplete. Like their counterparts in pieces written by Literary Impressionists, Carver’s laconic speakers often narrate in a reportorial, self-effacing manner. They objectively document subjective sensory experiences, requiring a heightened degree of interpretive synthesis.

The seemingly “deadpan” or “catatonic” quality of Minimalist works results from an adherence to reportorial objectivity, to the direct conveyance of mundane experience without an accompanying explanation of its significance. The narrator’s focus tends to be upon the senses, particularly vision, rather than thought. Hamlin Garland, a key figure in the theorization of literary Impressionism, is a student and admirer of the visual Impressionists, invigorated by the vibrant colors he sees on their canvasses. After viewing paintings by European practitioners of the mode at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, he articulates his conception of the movement:

The fundamental idea of the impressionists, as I understand it, is that a picture should be a unified impression. It should not be a mosaic, but a complete and of course momentary concept of the sense of sight. It should not deal with the concepts of other senses (as touch), nor with judgments; it should be the stayed and reproduced effect of single section of the world of color upon the eye. It should not be a number of pictures enclosed in one frame, but a single idea impossible of subdivision without loss. (97–98)

In this passage Garland identifies several technical axioms, some of which he later integrates into his fiction. He argues that a work should focus on one object. The image should represent a precise moment in time, and later in his analysis he elaborates on how artists strived to “represent in color an instantaneous effect of light and shade as presented by nature” (98). The immediacy he observes in the art is in part due to an emphasis on the present rather than the past (104). He is less clear in his appreciation of its painterly qualities, describing it paradoxically as not being photorealistic, but simple and “exact”; he suggests that while Impressionist painters may have seemed haphazard, they are still methodical craftsmen (105).

In his “Chicago Studies,” Garland attempts to translate some of his ideas about visual Impressionism into literature. The brief, imagistic pieces are composed in the 1890s but remain unpublished until they appeared in James B.

Stronks's essay "A Realist Experiments with Impressionism: Hamlin Garland's 'Chicago Studies'" in 1964. "The City Streets" illustrates how Garland transposes his perceptions of the artistic tradition into fiction:

The red sun struck across the canon-like thoroughfares, gilding the towering buildings standing like granite crags impassive and sullen.

Far down, the street narrowed till it ran like a tunnel under the gray-black tenuous smoke—and was lost to sight.

In this dim light, beneath this cloud of vapor, teams clamored to and fro, gongs of cars cried out imperiously, angrily, and men rushed back and forth, traversing the jungle of traffic like adroit and fearless insects. (49–50)

In his description of the light of "the red sun," Garland immediately establishes that he is describing an instant in time, a specific moment in the life of his central object: the city. Both the first and second lines are purely visual, consistent with his observation that Impressionistic art focuses on what is seen. The final image, however, violates this tenet in that it is concurrently auditory and visual: the rapid movement of people moving combines with the harsh sounds of the "jungle of traffic." The bustling, inexorable metropolitan organism is indifferent to the insect-like people who rush about the streets.

The lack of exposition, a comforting voice to explain what the scene means, creates the tone of distance and indifference. Garland writes during an era when the promise of technological progress is a source of hope for Americans (Quirk vii–ix), but "The City" evokes feelings of mechanistic peril. The speaker does not, however, didactically communicate this critical point in the manner of the Victorians. Garland implies much in few words, but he is able to do so with no exposition or narrative intrusion. His images do not in any way "judge" or assess what is being described. This is true of both Minimalist and Impressionist writing, because both rely heavily upon the suggestive power of individual images.

Minimalist stories often require readers to "assemble" images and allusions in order to make a coherent, complete narrative. In a discussion of the brushwork in Impressionistic paintings, James J. Kirschke writes that "the comparative absence of articulation forces the viewer to 'put the painting together' himself" (9). The characterization of protagonists in both traditions reflects the idea that life experiences are disjointed: "Impressionism means instantism. In *Les Nourritures Terrestres* life is reduced to instants. Instants are discontinuous, and life is an instantaneous experience. The self is discontinuous too: each new instant is lived in a new self, not committed to anything, yet always *disponible*" (Kronegger 61). Incongruence is in part the reason that austere fiction should be read with the same level of consideration often reserved for poetry. The reportorial nature of the mode is perhaps the reason some critics find it to be nihilistic or morally neutral. Because authors and narrators tend to be self-effacing, intrusiveness and exposition are rare. Thoughts and emotions are implied rather than told, so there are rarely explanatory passages in which protagonists contemplate what is happening to them.

Carver's "Cathedral" illustrates many of the technical similarities between Minimalism and Literary Impressionism. Authors working within the latter tradition sought "to render in literature the sensory nature of human life, to present to the reader the sensations of a character so graphically that the reader would experience the scene directly, participating in the action on the same epistemological plane as the character" (Nagel 19). This approach includes an attribute central to both movements: action is reported objectively. Most Impressionistic stories are narrated from a third-person perspective, relayed according to the subjective "lens" of the protagonist's perceptions. The author and narrator tend to be self-effacing, and the works lack overt didacticism. This reportorial style borrows from the visual counterpart of the mode, seeking to capture sensory experiences in a series of brief moments: "Impressionistic painting represented a single instant of sensory experience; Impressionistic literature also focused on an intense, abbreviated moment of experience, a *Vistazo*, and used such moments as either entire works or as units from which to build a larger artistic construct" (Nagel 19). In a statistical analysis of austere fiction written in the 1970s and 1980s, Roland Sadowsky concludes that "in its most extreme minimalist usage," narrators "pass on, without comment, objective narrative 'facts': present-time action, dialogue, and only the most essential exposition" (535). The prose poem, the "short-short story," the vignette, and many short stories employ a similar technique, and in longer pieces it can sometimes lead to a pervasive sense of fragmentation.

"Cathedral" is unusual in that the narrator is emotionally close to the actions he describes, yet maintains a detached stance. The suggestion is that he wants his audience to form their own conclusion. The oft-anthologized tale is a first-person retrospective narration, a crucial fact that most scholars tend to either miss or ignore.⁶ The scholarship generally focuses on whether the narrator undergoes a clear epiphany in the end. If the narrator had not undergone a profound change, it is unlikely he would tell the story in the first place. His experiences have stayed with him, and even though he does not understand why he is different, he wants to share. The most fundamental and perhaps important fact about "Cathedral," however, is that the present action of the piece is the act of the telling. The narrator's temporal relationship with past events in part addresses why he is talking about them at all.

The most likely reason for the telling of the story is that the protagonist is recalling an occurrence that was personally and emotionally transformative, and "Cathedral" chronicles the unnamed narrator's metamorphosis from prejudice to understanding. He recalls having a negative attitude about the entire idea of the visit, an event complicated by his own feelings of jealousy and inadequacy. He resents blindness, although he does not seem able to clearly express why. He is also fixated on the fact that his wife and Robert recorded tapes for each other and exchanged them through the mail and shared intimate details about their lives. The implication is that the man's marriage is fragile.

Carver subtly conveys the narrator's perturbation by making him sound terse and reportorial, a technique Hemingway uses in "The Killers" and that Cormac

McCarthy employs in his Minimalist *No Country for Old Men*. One of the most tension-filled moments in the latter occurs during a conversation between the murderous Anton Chigurh and a well-meaning convenience store clerk:

Will there be somethin else? the man said.
 I dont know. Will there?
 Is there somethin wrong?
 With what?
 With anything.
 Is that what you're asking me? Is there something wrong with anything? (53)

The less that is said, the more pointed the statement, the more menacing the tone. The two sections in "Cathedral" in which the narrator recalls the recordings, paradoxically, seem emotionless: "She wanted to talk. They talked. He asked her to send him a tape and tell him about her life. She did this. She sent the tape" (53). The more he talks about the content of the conversations, the more reluctant he is to ponder the subject: "The blind man made a tape. He sent her the tape. She made a tape. This went on for years" (211). The anger that resides below the surface of the narration is driven by jealousy: the speaker has not achieved a meaningful connection with his wife the way Robert has. The tense atmosphere of his memory begins to dissipate, however, as he recalls how the group ate and settled in for an evening by the television. Once Robert arrived at the house, the narrator relates how they quickly ate a big dinner then followed up by eating dessert, smoking dope, drinking, and watching a television program about cathedrals. In these brief moments, Carver establishes "Cathedral" as a story about the senses. Keith Cushman asserted that "the husband attempts to deaden his inner pain by pursuing various forms of sensory oblivion with his wife" (161). Carver is writing about people who crave physical stimulation and yet are not necessarily concerned about what it means. In the final sequence of the plot, the protagonist says that Robert revealed that he had no conception of what the churches look like, so he asked the narrator if he would draw one with him. The two men draw the picture together, and it is this intimate action that reshaped the protagonist's attitude.

The narrator's epiphany is rooted in the evolution of his perception. Mark A.R. Facknitz observed that "Carver redeems the narrator by releasing him from the figurative blindness that results in a lack of insight into his own condition and which leads him to trivialize human feelings and needs" (293). Carver said in an interview that he did not like to employ irony in his stories, but he does so in "Cathedral."⁷ The protagonist describes himself as a person who was in the past emotionally disconnected from others, particularly his wife. He talks about her suicide attempt and previous marriage in a coldly analytical way, as if he can barely believe that it truly happened. His problem is that he does not "see" his wife in the sense that he does not seek to understand who she is. The apparent difference between the men is that Robert, despite his physical lack of vision, is open to new experiences. When the narrator apologizes because there is nothing good on television except for a program about cathedrals, Robert's reply

illustrates the epistemic gap between the men: “‘Bub, it’s all right,’ the blind man said. ‘It’s fine with me. Whatever you want to watch is okay. I’m always learning something. Learning never ends. It won’t hurt me to learn something tonight. I got ears,’ he said” (222). Carver here alludes to Deuteronomy 29:4, “But to this day the Lord has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear,” accentuating the fundamental difference between the two men. The narrator lacks empathy because of his acute interpersonal limitations. He did not have “ears” or “eyes,” and this is the reason he did not “have *any* friends” (212). At no time during the narrative does the speaker explicitly acknowledge that he is in fact the “blind” person, but his willingness to talk about his experience with Robert suggests that he has become someone who is open, someone who finally has “eyes” and “ears.”

While spare prose is not central to Impressionism and serves as a means to differentiate it from Minimalism, epiphanic moments result from a shared stylistic tendency. Both modes emphasize the immediacy of sensory experience; narrators report occurrences and eschew explaining their moral or philosophical importance. The scene in which Robert and the narrator draw a cathedral together is synesthetic:

I put in windows with arches. I drew flying buttresses. I hung great doors. I couldn’t stop. The TV station went off the air. I put down the pen and closed and opened my fingers. The blind man felt around over the paper. He moved the tips of his fingers over the paper, all over what I had drawn, and he nodded. (227)

The sensory intensity of the moment erases all concerns about time; raw sensation drives the action more than the external significance of the channel going off the air, which marks the passing of time. Removing any semblance of an intellectual explanation for what it all meant, the narrator at no point says anything coherent or specific about the meaning of his experience: all he can reveal is that “it was like nothing else in my life up to now” (228). The protagonist does not articulate this experience because in Minimalist stories the reporting of raw sensory experience supersedes the communication of a larger moral or philosophical lesson. In “Literary Impressionism and *In Our Time*,” James Nagel explains the connection between sensation and thematic development: “The themes of Impressionism dealt with a character coming to terms with the world, coming to understand it better through epiphanies, and struggling constantly with problems of truth and illusion” (19). The narrator in “Cathedral” is only able to note a vague perceptual change. He does not completely comprehend why, but it is implied that for perhaps the first time he has wrestled with matters of “truth and illusion” and become more aware of a world outside of himself.

Despite integrating a subtle message about the consequences of emotional blindness, Carver was like Chekhov in that he did not use his fiction to force a political or moral lesson upon his audience. “Cathedral” is not, after all, a story about why individuals, or perhaps society in general, should be kinder and more

sensitive to people who are blind. In *Literary Impressionism: James and Chekhov*, H. Peter Stowell described the technical stance of the Impressionist author, a description that applies equally well to Minimalist writers:

The impressionists' belief in the primacy of perception forced the pose of the omniscient, didactic, and discursive author out of the work. He was replaced by an elusive presence who allowed all characters to perceive for themselves the ambiguous and ultimately unknowable surfaces of sensory reality. (17)

The narrator's epiphany in "Cathedral" is only possible because he treats the person he was in the past as a separate entity. His position is one of remembrance; he is thinking back to a previous state of "self." Time and distance have not, however, granted him the capacity to explain why he is different.

Because the fiction in both modes tends to feature epiphanic moments, the interplay of rejection and acceptance frequently appears in Impressionistic and Minimalist works, particularly in that of Chekhov. Chekhov's "The Grasshopper" is thematically similar to "Cathedral," as both are about perceptual and epistemic limitation. In each piece, the narrator recounts the experiences of an emotionally estranged married couple, and each ends with one of the spouses coming to a moment of profound realization. "The Grasshopper" is about the marriage of Olga Ivanovna, a vivacious art-lover, and her dry, cerebral husband, Osip Stepanovich Dymov. While Olga flits around with her artist friends, her steady, unemotional husband time and again proves his love and devotion. He advances in his career, becoming a well-respected doctor. Craving passion and spontaneity, Olga has an affair with a painter, Ryabovsky, who ultimately tires of her and leaves. Like so many of Chekhov's fictions, it ends tragically.

Chekhov subtly develops a sense of irony as it becomes more apparent that for all the pleasure she takes in artists, clothing, and paintings, Olga, like the narrator in "Cathedral," is figuratively blind. She does not "see" the artistry and beauty in her husband's scientific pursuits. Dymov eventually dies of diphtheria, which he develops after foolishly sucking the pus from a diseased boy's throat, but his actions can be interpreted as self-sacrificial. Only after his death is Olga able to comprehend her husband's value, and her blindness is such that she is only able to have her epiphany after a family friend, Korostelev, delivers an impassioned appreciation of Dymov:

"Dying," he repeated in a high voice and again sobbed. "Dying, because he sacrificed himself. What a loss to science!" he said with bitter emphasis. "In comparison with all the rest of us he was a great man, a remarkable man. What a gift! What hopes he inspired in us all!" went on Korostelev, wringing his hands. "My God, my God, he would have been such a scientist, such a rare scientist! Osip Dymov, Osip Dymov, what have you done? Oh. God!" (89)

Olga's epiphany is not as subtle as that of the protagonist in "Cathedral," but it is a moment in which she recognizes that her perception of him was limited:

Olga Ivanovna went back in memory over her whole life with him, from beginning to end, in the utmost detail, and suddenly realized that he really had been a remarkable man, an unusual man, a great man, in comparison with all the others she had known. And remembering the attitude to him of her late father, and of all his colleagues, she realized that they had all seen in him a future celebrity. The walls, the ceiling, the lamp and the carpet on the floor winked mockingly at her, as if trying to say: "You've missed your chance!" (89)

Olga's thoughts shape her sensory experience in the epiphanic moment; in her mind she personifies the mundane objects in the room, perceiving them as derisive of her misperception. This is not, however, a moral issue: Chekhov does not indicate that Olga has done something "wrong." She has instead missed an opportunity to live a life that could have been fuller and more expansive. The narrator does not, for example, imply that it is Olga's infidelity that has caused Dymov's death. If anything, "Cathedral" and "The Grasshopper" suggest that a lack of vision results in an isolation that leads to a poverty of the senses: life is not as rich as it *could* be. Chekhov implies that there is hope, however, because not everyone in Olga's world has shared her fate. Others who saw Dymov's ability differed from her by refusing to see beauty only in common mediums such as painting and sculpture. Carver and his fellow American Minimalists developed an aesthetic focused upon broadening ideas about what constitutes a "suitable" artistic subject.

The title story in many ways serves as a thematic model for the rest of the stories in *Cathedral* in that each involves figures whose limited sensorial experiences lead to confined parameters. Kirk Nessel posits that the narratives that comprise *Cathedral* are linked by common themes of "insularity."⁸ While this is in many ways true, it is, attributable to the stylistic influence of Chekhov and Literary Impressionism, that is to a formal decision to use this style, rather than to the story's thematic or a character or narrator's psychological development alone. In "Chef's House," Wes essentially admits defeat because he is unwilling to broaden his narrow view of the future. In "Careful," Lloyd's ability to listen to his wife Inez is literally blocked by an impediment wedged in his ear. Holits, a failed Minnesotan farmer whose story is told in "The Bridle," is portrayed in a series of highly visceral sequences. Poised to jump into the water from the top of a poolside cabana, he ignores his wife's plea that he "think" about what he is about to do and falls to the deck. Unable to verbalize why he is slowly dismantling himself, he can only admit that he is no longer able to "go it" (203–204).⁹ He is in many ways restricted, and the suggestion is that he is unable to regain the sense of control he once enjoyed when he was taking care of his responsibilities. An item he leaves behind when he and his family decide to move on from their Arizona hotel room is suggestive of his despondence. Pondering the eponymous bridle that the Holitses abandon when they move on, Marge, the narrator, considers its sensorial significance: "The bit's heavy and cold. If you had to wear this thing between your teeth, I guess you'd catch on in a hurry" (208). Holits's decision to

“forget” the object is perhaps the fulfillment of a subconscious desire to move past his need for physical stimulation.

Immediate experience, the intense feelings so many of Carver’s characters yearn for, often detrimentally supersedes knowledge and wisdom. Carver’s protagonists are often limited by a type of sensory deprivation, something that keeps them from beginning the necessary process of synthesizing the meaning of their actions. All of his figures, especially those who are alcoholic, aggressively deaden their senses: some thoughts and memories are too painful to contemplate.

The complexity of Carver’s protagonists is often derived from their willful pursuit of insularity. Their blindness is often a function of a desire to ignore or even misinterpret what their senses tell them. The narrator in “Cathedral” is, ironically, the one who does not see, but it is because he is focused far more on sensorial experience than upon the need to contemplate. Carver omits one of his speaker’s primary motivations for telling the story: he is indirectly admitting that he has a better understanding of his wife. After she has fallen asleep, she essentially disappears. The narrator suggests that she provided the impetus for the drawing scene, however, by demonstrating how engaging in a sensory exchange with another person can lead to profound understanding. What Carver holds up for examination, along with many other Minimalist and Impressionist authors, is whether experience can be clearly articulated.

The legacy of American Minimalists such as Carver and Hemingway has strengthened over the last three decades; authors continue to write Impressionistic tales that depict protagonists struggling with ineffability. Luis Alberto Urrea’s “The White Girl” (2008), for example, is a brief, fragmentary sketch that features a character who attempts to come to terms with an emotionally significant event through a highly sensorial, figuratively communal act. Like the climax of “Cathedral,” the end of “The White Girl” involves the creation of a collaborative piece of visual stimulus. ² Short is a “tagger,” or graffiti artist, who one day discovers a junkyard full of decaying cars. He investigates the inside of a 1971 Dodge Charger and finds blood stains and human hair, and the implication is that the passenger or passengers who once drove the vehicle had died in a crash. He begins to reconstruct one of the victims in his mind, imagining who she was based on a pair of objects he finds as he searches the compartment. The narrator recounts that

he found her bracelet under the seat. Her wrist must have been slender. It was a little gold chain with a little blue stone heart. He held it in his palm. Chick must have croaked right here.

He stared at the starred windshield. The way it was pushed out around the terrible cracks. Still brown. More blood. And then the hair. (Urrea 22)

The paratactic, declarative sentences, as well as the morbid yet emotionally charged content, are reminiscent of the work of Hemingway and McCarthy. ² Short finds himself in a dangerous waste land, a figurative graveyard, connecting with the lost memory of a “white girl” whom he has never known. He takes

some of her hair home with him, rubbing it “over his lips” (22). Unable to come to terms with what he has seen and touched, he begins to tag train cars with “THE WHITE GIRL,” and the speaker says that 2 Short “sent it out to the world. He prayed with his can. He could not stop” (23). The pacing of Urrea’s sentences is remarkably similar to that of Carver’s and conveys the same sense of instant thought-reaction: “I drew flying buttresses. I hung great doors. I couldn’t stop” (227). 2 Short experiences an epiphany, but like the narrator in Carver’s “Cathedral” is unable to fathom its significance in the end. Consistent with the Minimalist tradition, neither the narrator nor the protagonist explain the meaning behind his deeds.

Like Urrea, Carver intimates that tactile expression can serve as a substitute, or emotional buffer, for contemplation. In other words, in Carver’s fiction visceral actions and reactions can seldom be clearly interpreted. Beattie’s assertion that Carver keeps his readers “in the house” is a cogent statement about the epistemology that often governs Minimalist fiction. It speaks to the origins of the mode, paradoxically a direct response to the claim that the mode has yet to be defined. Despite the fact that many Impressionistic works are not as sparse as those created by Minimalists, both movements depend upon an aesthetic of suggestiveness and limitation. As Beattie alluded to, it is a style that depends upon the successful execution of Hemingway’s Iceberg Principle. Carver omits much from “Cathedral,” and what he reveals about his narrator’s sensory experience carries a number of implications but no certainties. The speaker is a man who depends upon what he can see and feel; the act of telling his story suggests that he desires some form of reply or explanation.

Notes

1. See, for example, Barth, Herzinger, Hallett, Karl, McDermott, and Rebein.
2. The introduction to the first *Some Imagist Poets* anthology, a piece written by Richard Aldington and then edited to a minor degree by Lowell (Hughes 39), includes six rules:
 1. To use the language of common speech, but to employ always the exact word, not the nearly-exact, nor the merely decorative word.
 2. To create new rhythms — as the expression of new moods — and not to copy old rhythms, which merely echo old moods. We do not insist upon “free-verse” as the only method of writing poetry. We fight for it as for a principle of liberty. We believe that the individuality of a poet may often be better expressed in free-verse than in conventional forms. In poetry, a new cadence means a new idea.
 3. To allow absolute freedom in the choice of subject. It is not good art to write badly about aeroplanes and automobiles; nor is it necessarily bad art to write well about the past. We believe passionately in the artistic value of modern life, but we wish to point out that there is nothing so uninspiring nor so old-fashioned as an aeroplane of the year 1911.
 4. To present an image (hence the name: “Imagist”). We are not a school of painters, but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities,

however magnificent and sonorous. It is for this reason that we oppose the cosmic poet, who seems to us to shirk the real difficulties of his art.

5. To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite.
6. Finally, most of us believe that concentration is of the very essence of poetry. (Aldington and others, *Some Imagist Poets* vi–vii)

These tenets suggest that Pound's original emphases were not cast aside but rather used as the foundation for an evolving aesthetic. T.E. Hulme emphasized many of the same ideas, particularly in terms of focusing on objects and using language that is "hard and clear" (Hughes 40). Perhaps because of the growing influence of Asian poetry among the members of the group, Lowell added to the list "suggestion—the implying of something rather than the stating of it, implying it perhaps under a metaphor, perhaps in an even less obvious way" (247).

3. Carver and Chekhov are the subjects of multiple comparisons, although none of the critical work addresses the latter as an Impressionistic influence upon the former. Carver has written extensively about the Russian author, and his late short story "Errand" is about Chekhov's death. The piece is biographical in tone, as if the narrator is analyzing the life and philosophies of Chekhov as they were in his final days. The structure of "Errand" is unconventional, however, in that the second half deals more with the sensory experiences of those directly involved with Chekhov's death, particularly a young hotel worker who is asked to perform the eponymous errand by finding a mortician to handle the late author's body.

For discussions of the similarities between Carver and Chekhov, see May, Boddy, Zverev, and McSweeney. During an interview with Robert Pope and Lisa McElhinny, Carver offered one of his most often-quoted statements about Chekhov:

I'm a great admirer of Chekhov's short stories, and I will borrow from Chekhov at the risk of parody. I'll borrow something that he said. He divides works of literature into two classes—things he likes and things he doesn't like. I really don't have any theories for writing stories. I know what I like. I know what I don't like. I don't like dishonesty in writing. I don't like tricks. I like an honest story, well told. No matter if there's romance in the story or whatever. (16)

4. In the note to *Beginners*, Stull and Carroll published a letter in which Carver requested that Lish stop production of the book because the stories have been over-edited. Lish did not acquiesce. See Raymond Carver, *Carver: Collected Stories* 990–98.

5. In an interview with David Sexton, Carver described "Cathedral" as "different from anything I'd ever written" and that "all of the stories after that seemed to be fuller somehow and much more generous and maybe more affirmative" (125).

6. Arthur F. Bethea, Arthur M. Saltzman, Mark A.R. Facknitz, Nelson Hathcock, and Peter Middleton discuss the narrative as if Robert's visit takes place in the narrator's present. See Bethea (154–56), Facknitz (287–96), Saltzman (151–54), Middleton (331–38), and Hathcock (31–39).

7. This was a contentious issue to Carver. He said in an interview that he did not in his stories want to create a dynamic that positions himself and the reader on the inside and his character on the outside:

The Bloomsbury Review: Some critics believe that if there's one thing uniting these writers and setting them apart from other postmoderns, it's their distaste for irony. Does that ring true to you?

Raymond Carver: I think they mean that these writers, the so-called "minimalists," are not ironists in the sense that there are no secrets between the sophisticated writer and the writer's sophisticated audience. And I would agree with them there. I see irony as a sort of pact or compact between the writer and the reader in that they know more than the characters

do. The characters are set up and then they're set down again in some sort of subtle pratfall or awakening. I don't feel any such complicity with the reader. I'm not talking down to my characters, or holding them up for ridicule, or slyly doing an end run around them. I'm much more interested in my characters, in the people in my story, than I am in any potential reader. I'm uncomfortable with irony if it's at the expense of someone else, if it hurts the characters. I don't think that's in my stories, and I really don't see much of it in the writers who are talked about as minimalists. I strive not to do that. I think I'd be ashamed of myself if I did. (Carver and Stull 185)

"Cathedral" is remarkable in that it does not evoke a sense of animus towards the narrator. His blindness, in other words, is understandable and the irony is not hurtful.

8. See Nessel, Chapter 3.

9. Read in the context of "Cathedral," Holits is indicating that he intended to commit suicide when he jumped from the roof of the cabana. The narrator-protagonist in "Cathedral" says that shortly before attempting to kill herself, his wife "got to feeling she couldn't go it another step" (211). Holits is unable to explain this in the moments following his injury because he does not have the benefit of temporal distance from the event. On the other hand, time has not allowed for the speaker in "Cathedral" to comprehend why he has changed since Robert's visit.

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