Towards a Genealogy of American Literary Minimalism

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Submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master in the subject of English and American Literature
The University of Kent
2012

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Word count: 15,204

Introduction: Competing Definitions

Any investigation of literary minimalism must first confront the lack of clarity around the term's definition. Its application in the visual arts began in the 1960s in reference to work characterised by an unfinished quality, and was seen 'not as a defined movement but as a debate that surrounded a new kind of abstraction' (Meyer 11).

In literature, by contrast, the term is applied to a style of writing not interested in abstraction but concretisation, a focussing of attention onto detail. If, as Cynthia Hallett phrases it, minimalist art's goal was to 'avoid any implications or meaning beyond the subject/object itself and aim at a kind of phenomenological purity,' then minimalist literature could hardly be more different, seeking as it did to 'evoke within a minimal frame some larger issue by means of figurative associations' (1).

A somewhat closer resemblance is perhaps present in the term's application in music, where it came to refer to work incorporating repetition and self-referentiality. To an extent this was also to be true of the self-contained snapshot of the minimalist short story, though Hallett's point above is again to be borne in mind: minimalist literature was always bigger than just what was on the page.

This indeterminacy of definition is figured also in the near pathological propagation of potential alternative labels. John Barth lists some:

> 'Dirty Realism (*Granta*); New Realism; Pop Realism; and our own lovable Neo-Domestic Neo Realism. Interested parties, before or since, suggested White Trash Fiction; Coke Fiction; 'Post-Alcoholic Blue-Collar Minimalist Hyperrealism'

And Kim Herzinger provides more:

> ''Around-the house-and-in-the-yard' Fiction (Don DeLillo); Wised Up Realism; TV Fiction; High Tech Fiction; Designer Realism; Extra-Realism; and the svelte Post-Post-Modernism.' (Herzinger 1985, 7)

Attempts to define a minimalist fiction by reference to its characteristics are only slightly less numerous. In his 1985 introduction to a special issue of the *Mississippi Review* dedicated to the style Kim Herzinger offers the following:

> 'work loosely characterized by equanimity of surface, 'ordinary' subjects, recalcitrant narrators and deadpan narratives, slightness of story and characters who don't think out loud.' (7)

A revised version four years later is expanded into a checklist of adjectives—'a) formally sparse, terse, trim; b) tonally cool, detached, noncommittal; c) oblique and elliptical'—and potential qualities to which Herzinger seems unwilling to commit: 'h) often written in the present tense; i) often written in the first person; j) sometimes written in the second person...' (Herzinger 1989, 73).

Writing in 1996, and therefore with the aid of a measure of hindsight, Roland Sodowsky frames his definition in curiously narrow temporal and socio-economic terms:

> 'published primarily between 1975 and 1989, most minimalist short-stories are set in present-time America; their effaced narrators report action and dialogue, some exposition and occasionally introspection in the same non-literary language used by their self-focussed blue collar or yuppie characters' (539).

Roland Barth, writing in the *New York Times* in 1986, offered a more inclusive formulation that distinguished between style—'a stripped-down vocabulary; a stripped-down syntax'—and material: 'minimal characters, minimal exposition ('all that David Copperfield kind of crap,' says J.D. Salinger's catcher in the rye), minimal mises en scene, minimal action, minimal plot.'

Finally there is the possibility that what is sometimes read as part of the minimalist aesthetic is actually a trait of the style's most common literary form: the short story. Cynthia Hallett makes this point:

> 'In essence, as a literary style minimalism is as the short story genre does [...] Both are compact, condensed, and contracted in design; both are especially dependent on figurative language and symbolic associations as channels for expanded meaning.' (4)

These definitions provide a starting point, but by virtue of their inconclusiveness and the extent to which they sometimes conflict, they suggest to me that the search for an inviolable and fixed definition of minimalism is destined to be fruitless. Therefore, by close examination of the techniques of a number of writers as employed in works published over nearly a century of American literature, I hope to determine some commonalities that suggest a lineage of literary minimalism, as well as to uncover the manner in which the style has changed over time.

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I: The Roots of Minimalism

When Ernest Hemingway was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954 the dedication stated that it was for 'his mastery of the art of narrative, most recently demonstrated in The Old Man and the Sea, and for the influence that he has exerted on contemporary style'. In his presentation speech Anders Österling spoke of 'a reorientation of literary interest' which had seen American authors come to prominence on the world literary stage over the preceding decades. Österling positions Hemingway as emblematic of contemporary American literature, and in doing so makes a connection between the author's latest work and a novel that had recently turned 100 years old: Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851). '[W]ith different means, those of romanticism and of realism, they both attain the same theme', he states, drawing a straight line through a century of American letters.

Österling's interest is in aligning a modern writer with the legacy of an accepted master, and his method of doing so hinges upon similarity of theme: 'a man's capacity of endurance' as he puts it. Conversely, and recognising that an award presentation speech is perhaps no time for detailed examination of literary genealogy, Österling's task necessitates that he skirts the issue of the two writers' stylistic differences. His formulation glosses a turbulent century in the American literary landscape, and one which (as his speech points out) had greatly influenced the reading habits of a worldwide audience.

In the decades since, Hemingway's influence has continued to be felt, but it is style and not necessarily theme which has been embraced and transformed by countless writers of the succeeding generations. Glen A. Love's praise of Hemingway's writing is typical, as he lauds it for 'its charged sparseness, its economy that strips away all excess and overt emotion, while conveying the powerful feeling underlying the experience itself' (295). Sparse, economical, emotionally muted - these are common evaluations of a writing style which has become as well known as any of the author's works individually. Let us take inventory of some of its prominent characteristics.

Hemingway's is a syntax which privileges nouns and verbs at the expense of adverbs and adjectives. A propensity for short sentences, or sentences comprised of short clauses gives the writing an even, rhythmic pace. In general Hemingway's sentences do not contain subordinate clauses; according to Elizabeth Wells's detailed analysis of Hemingway's style 73% of the sentences in *In Our Time* are simple (Benson 131). And, as Phil Greaney points out, where more complex sentence structure is employed Hemingway takes measures to ensure its clarity:

> 'Where a subordinate clause exists it is in direct support of the primary clause [...] This helps convey a sense of a central, unified proposition. Hemingway's method is to provide an independent, single unit of information expressed without the influence of competing subordinate clauses.' (85)

Each Hemingway sentence can be seen as static: a discrete unit of information, but Hemingway avoids an overall stasis of his prose by various means. Where longer sentences do occur polysyndeton is often employed in place of more subtle (but complex) punctuation, driving the reader forward. In both dialogue and narrative, Hemingway frequently makes use of repeated words or phrases, again adding to the rhythmic variety of the prose. And, perhaps most powerfully of all, he calls upon the active engagement of the reader in ways crucial to the effectiveness of his writing. Where two or more short sentences could have been given as a single longer sentence the decision to present them as individual units leaves the task of inferring the relationship between elements to the reader. Taking the same principle further Hemingway constructs his entire narrative to be supported by omitted material, the presence of which must nevertheless be felt by the attentive reader. This is the basis of what has been termed 'Iceberg Theory' after Hemingway's formulation as given in *Death in the Afternoon*:

> 'If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing.' (183)

Judging the effectiveness of material absent from finished works poses certain challenges, and writing that operates under the principle of active omissions courts the possibility of being read as incomplete, shallow, or obfuscatory. However, whilst later writers often faced charges of omission through lack of skill or want of something to say, Hemingway is more often the recipient of more generous critical evaluations. In part this is certainly by virtue of primacy: as the writer credited with popularising this economy of language, and also thanks to his established reputation and that of his works, Hemingway is given the benefit of the doubt where others are not. We will see this figured in later assessments of his successors where critics are keen to absolve Hemingway of the faults they see in, for example, Raymond Carver. There is also the matter of Hemingway's insistence upon reader participation, which places part of the blame for any perceived failures in the fiction upon the reader's shoulders:

> 'Read anything I write for the pleasure of reading it. Whatever else you find will be the measure of what you brought to the reading.' (Plimpton 76)

Thus, Joseph Warren Beach counts Hemingway as the centre of a writerly 'cult of the simple' who 'prefer the method of implication to that of explicit statement' (530-1). There is no suggestion of dishonesty or of lack of skill or content in such an evaluation, and to recognise the dynamics of the work in this way is to accept one's obligation of active readership. However, this technique places at the centre of Hemingway's style an interesting balance between plainness and obfuscation. Despite a syntax designed toward clarity Hemingway has purposefully left out pieces of the fiction in the belief that they will be discovered by the attentive reader. In doing so he has ignored the advice of his acquaintance Ezra Pound's, in his 1917 essay 'A Retrospect', towards 'Direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective' (Eliot 3), instead favouring implication and deduction.

At the heart of the problem is the premium Hemingway puts on 'truth' in his works of fiction. In *A Moveable Feast* he gives the writer's task plainly: 'All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know' (12). But if the enterprise of

writing a true sentence is furthered by reliance on plain language, is it not undermined by the effects of omission, which, as Greaney puts it, 'stimulates symbolic polyvalence' (116)? Asking the reader to be an active participant risks miscomprehension, and can only be warranted if the 'truth' toward which Hemingway is aiming is not a factual but an emotional one. 'Hemingway privileges 'feeling' over 'understanding',' argues Greaney, 'and the attempt to recreate this feeling in his reader is one of the central defining moments of the origin of the minimalist aesthetic' (51). By presenting in a sequence of simple, declarative sentences the facts of his fiction, Hemingway asks his reader to engage in the active discovery of the textual elements' relationship one to another, and in doing so to experience something of the emotional truth of his characters' situation. This indirect appeal to readers' emotional intellect is an oft overlooked characteristic of the minimalist tradition, which when misunderstood has led to accusations of nihilism - it is something to which we will return in looking at the techniques of later writers.

Whilst elements of the minimalist style (such as plain syntax) exist strongly throughout the corpus of Hemingway's work the best examples of the overall effect are present in the short stories of *In Our Time* (1925), and *Men Without Women* (1927) and, of the novels, in 1926's *The Sun Also Rises*. The early short stories are the proving ground for the theory of omission[1]. However, just as certain later stories, such as 'A Clean, Well Lighted Place' (1933) follow in this mold, occasionally earlier stories break the pattern: for example the use of first person narration and an expanded vocabulary in 'My Old Man' (1925). As such it would be inaccurate to consider Hemingway's style as fixed, and similarly, though I place him here as the first node on the timeline of the minimalist aesthetic, it would be wrong to consider Hemingway's style either entirely unique, or having sprung into existence *ex nihilo*.

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[1] Hemingway names 'Out of Season' (1925) as being shaped by 'my *new* theory that you could omit anything if you knew that you omitted, and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people *feel* something

Many of the more prominent influences on Hemingway's style are well documented: chief among them his time as a reporter for the *Star* papers in Kansas City and Toronto. The style sheet of the former, where Hemingway started his journalism career at the age of 20, instructs its writers to 'Use short sentences. Use short first paragraphs. Use vigorous English. Be positive not negative,' and to 'Eliminate every superfluous word'. In addition, and in direct relation to the style Hemingway would adopt for his fiction, it reads: 'Avoid the use of adjectives, especially such extravagant ones as splendid, gorgeous, grand, magnificent etc'. Hemingway himself credited his journalistic experience for helping found the building blocks of his syntax: 'On the *Star*,' he said, 'you were forced to learn to write a simple declarative sentence' (Plimpton 70). But it was not just a reliance on simple sentence structure that Hemingway took from his time at the paper. As Kenneth Kidd notes:

> 'It's as if he were consciously using newsprint to incubate and test various storytelling techniques. The spare, muscular sentences, the repetition of words in close proximity to one another, the use of simple but poignant contrasts, Hemingway's omniscient voice — all were developed in his journalism of the early 1920s.'

One does not have to look very far within Hemingway's journalistic output to observe the gestation of some of the techniques he would later employ in fiction. One piece from 1923, on a deceased Spanish entertainer named Tancredo, provides examples of his use of repetition and his reliance on simple sentences:

> 'In the end Tancredo's popularity was lost because of his own perfection.
> There was no possibility of an accident with Tancredo. Tancredo was too brave.
> Then a woman emulator came along. That was the final straw.'

It also exemplifies the emotional weight of which his simple style was capable:

> 'For years he was a familiar figure around the cafés of the Puerto del Sol in Madrid and then the disappeared. It takes money to sit in a café.
> Now he is dead.'

This second excerpt is indicative of what Greaney terms Hemingway's desire 'to move the reader, rather than supply an unemotive, unbiased 'report'' (44), and is directly related to Hemingway's ambitions of readers' emotional engagement with his fiction. When freed of the journalistic restraints of factual 'truth' this technique is strengthened in its appeal to emotional truths by Hemingway's understanding of the imagist techniques of Ezra Pound et al, from whom he learned the power of placing discrete elements next to each other so as to evoke sensation. Poetic imagism had been part of what Raymond Chandler, in discussing its relationship to fiction, would later call 'a revolutionary debunking of both the language and the material of fiction' (57). Similarly Glen Love recognises a 'drive toward simplification' as being 'one of the central features in the development of prose style since the time of the Civil War' (299).

In his eminent essay '*The Professor's House*: Cather, Hemingway, and the Chastening of American Prose Style' (1990) Love identifies in the works of Willa Cather a shift towards simplification contemporary and comparable with Hemingway's. In her novel *The Professor's House* (1925) he notes a 'directness and clarity' of description:

> 'The sentences are grammatically simple, or else compound—simple sentences linked together coordinately.' (303)

Love also notes a heavy reliance on monosyllabic words and the use of repetition as 'a kind of denial of style, a refusal to reach out for graceful synonyms, as if these would somehow falsely muffle the hardness of the ultimate reality' (305). In 1922 Cather had published an essay calling for the 'unfurnishing' of the novel, saying that 'The higher processes of art are all processes of simplification' (6). Many of the ideas expressed by Cather bear great resemblance to those espoused by Hemingway in explication of his theory of omission. Her belief, for example, in the power of omitted material:

> 'Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, it seems to me, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named' (6)

It is of particular interest that Cather chooses the word 'felt' here, since it mirrors the appeal to emotional intelligence which we have seen in Hemingway. And likewise Cather writes of the active role of the reader in fiction from which the explicit has been excised:

> 'finding what conventions of form and what detail one can do without and yet preserve the spirit of the whole—so that all that one has suppressed and cut away is there to the reader's consciousness as much as if it were in type on the page' (Knopf 7)

If, as Chandler suggests, a 'revolutionary debunking' of literary language and material was in progress in early 20th century American letters, it is not surprising that two prominent writers were expressing such similar sentiments. Indeed we will expect to find further evidence of a distrust of romantic literary ideals, and other instances of the kind of unimpeachable, declarative syntax evinced by Hemingway and Cather. The aforementioned imagist verse, as codified by Ezra Pound in a 1913 issue of *Poetry*, is certainly one touchstone, calling not just for 'direct treatment of the 'thing'', as noted above, but also promising to 'use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation' (Eliot 3). 'It probably started in poetry,' Chandler writes, 'almost everything does' (57), but by the 1920s the revolution's expansion to prose had reached not just literature but also a thriving market for genre fiction.

With advances in faster, cheaper printing, and the advent of the railways as a faster, cheaper distribution method the 1870-90s saw a massive proliferation of periodicals and magazines. A highly competitive market saw the creation of innumerable magazines aimed squarely at a particular readership—Jews, African-Americans—or carrying a particular type of content. And, in place of the serialised works that had been the staple of newspapers, magazines began to demand complete pieces that could run, in their entirety,

in a single issue. The sheer volume of periodical publication saw the short story become a dominant format enjoyed at levels beyond modern comparison.[2]

Amongst the magazines specialising in genre fiction *Black Mask* purported to be 'Five magazines in one: the best stories available of adventure, the best mystery and detective stories, the best romances, the best love stories, and the best stories of the occult'. However, an editorial in 1927 by new editor Joseph 'Cap' Shaw, rededicated the magazine solely to the publication of a particular type of crime fiction with which Shaw had become enamoured. Distinguished by a tight, descriptive prose style, the stories of Carroll John Daly (beginning with 'Three Gun Terry' in 1923), and Dashiell Hammett (whose first story in the magazine, 'The Road Home', was published under an alias in 1922) became the sole focus of *Black Mask*'s output. This new breed of detective fiction was notable for resituating the crime genre in the back alleys of the growing American cities, and for finding a language in which to do it. Writing in 2009, crime novelist Walter Mosley defined what would come to be known as the 'hardboiled' style thus: 'elegant and concise language used to describe an ugly and possibly irredeemable world... in spite of this elegance, it is a blunt object intent upon assault and battery' (Marcus 599). The emergence of the *Black Mask* style has been considered the 'greatest change in the detective story since Poe' (Nye 255), and at its core it was centered around the writing of one man. In a 1948 letter another prominent writer for the magazine, Raymond Chandler, reports that Shaw's editorial edict had been 'that everyone had to write just like Hammett' (Hiney 92).

Similarly to Hemingway, Dashiell Hammett had received military experience in the ambulance corps, and though he had no journalistic training he had learned similar lessons about written concision whilst working in advertising. By his own admission, however, most informative to his crime writing however was his eight years' experience as a

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[2] For details regarding the rise of magazine culture I am indebted to Kasia Boddy's thorough analysis in *The American Short Story Since 1950*.

member of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency. When Hammett is referred to as 'an unindicative writer - not a lot of adverbs' (Eyman), we may rightly draw comparisons to Hemingway's style, but we might also seek reference in Hammett's own biography. As biographer Richard Layman puts it:

> 'The essential quality which a detective must develop to avoid being consumed by his job is objectivity – an emotional distance from the people with whom he deals. If he becomes emotionally involved with a client, he will forfeit the objectivity required to gather all the available information and observe all the pertinent clues relating to the case. If he allows himself to hate a criminal, he will lose the emotional equilibrium required to protect himself and to make all his decisions coolly and logically.' (12)

Over the course of eight years Hammett published more than 50 stories in *Black Mask*, as well as work in several similar magazines. A story from 1929, 'Fly Paper', serves as an excellent example of style. Read in comparison with Hemingway's prose the most immediate noticeable departure is the use of the first-person narrative voice. Rare in Hemingway's short stories it is common in Hammett's oeuvre and in hardboiled work in general. Following as a result of this choice the narrative diction employs a greater use of slang vernacular than Hemingway would allow. Words like 'clan', 'kink', and 'tabbed', and phrases like 'dummying up', and '"Hop to it"' (Hammett 718) are too colourful for Hemingway's effaced narrator, their use alone lending the speaker too boldly stated a personality. This grants the reader greater insight into the narrator's thought process in a Hammett story. At the start of 'Fly Paper''s fourth section a full paragraph explains how the character intends to proceed; this kind of internal insight is eschewed by Hemingway in favour of simply presenting the action as it occurs. If we are allowed knowledge of characters' thoughts and feelings in his work it happens only in the moment and is gleaned by close attention to their words and observation of their actions.

What remains missing in a Hammett story however, is emotional revelation. Virtually all insights are directed towards the particulars of the physical action, and there is little in the way of reflection on situations and nothing of self-reflection. This limited interiority, restricted to the domain of practicalities, is a trait familiar from Hemingway, and found in

various forms in many of the writers we will encounter later. What we read as journalistic distance in Hemingway's fiction, figured in his use of an absent, third-person narrator, we can see here as Hammett placing the emotional detachment that served him as a detective into his fictional detective narrators. Later we will find similar techniques used in the representation of narrators defined in part by their depression, or alcoholism - emotional withdrawal remaining a staple of minimalist fiction's central characters.

Despite these similarities of style Bruce Murphy, an historian of the mystery genre, argues that Hammett should not be counted among the minimalists:

> 'minimalism is a conscious reaction to some other literary convention perceived to be wordy and overwritten. Hammett was not so much naturalistic as simply natural.' (quoted in Eyman n. pag.)

The question of whether hardboiled is properly considered a subcategory of minimalism is of little practical use. We can say, however, that as a style it embraces the same reliance on direct, kinetic sentences and prizes action over reflection. If the dialogue is more colourful than we will find elsewhere in the minimalist genealogy it is still not too far removed from that spoken by the two hitmen in Hemingway's 'The Killers' (1927), or the blackjack wielding homeless man in 'The Battler' (1925). For all of its syntactic similarities however, the construction of a hardboiled story is very different to that found at the core of minimalism. Where omissions exist in the text they are there either to preserve the emotional privacy of the characters, or as part of the unravelling of plot. Detective fiction, after all, is engaged in the telling of a particular type of story: one with a mystery at its centre and presumed justice at its conclusion. This structured format is in direct contrast to that of core minimalism, which contents itself with the presentation of simple scenes, often only lightly contextualised, and devoid of traditional dramatic structure. As Roland Sodowsky phrases it:

> 'The minimalist short story generally does not build on causal action toward a conventional resolution, or toward an ending at all, much less a moral.' (538)

Following a precipitous drop in sales figures, occasioned in part by the growing popularity of comic books and radio, 'Cap' Shaw was replaced in the post of editor of *Black Mask* by Fanny Ellsworth, who had in mind a different tone for the magazine: one which allowed for examination of the heroes' emotional lives. The evolution of the hardboiled style after Shaw's departure is figured neatly in Raymond Chandler, who published 10 stories in the magazine between 1933's 'Blackmailers Don't Shoot' and leaving alongside Shaw in 1936. More educated than many of the genre's writers, Chandler brought to his work a knowledge of Henry James and Dickens as well as displaying the more direct influences of Hemingway and Hammett - a line of succession which Chandler himself points out:

> 'Hammett was the ace performer, but there is nothing in his work that was not implicit in the early novels and short stories of Hemingway.' (Chandler 57)

Chandler's relationship with his influences, and with genre fiction, was somewhat turbulent. He credited Hammett not only his (Chandler's) success but for the popularising of the genre, and the invention of the style itself:

> 'He had a literary style, but his audience didn't know it, because it was a language not supposed to be capable of such refinements.' (58)

But this did not preclude his eventual discomfort at being continually regarded as residing in Hammett's shadow. In a 1942 letter to Blanche Knopf he writes 'I hope the day will come when I won't have to ride around on Hammett … like an organ grinder's monkey' (Hiney 33). In a letter to her husband, publisher Albert Knopf, three years earlier Chandler had already expressed his desire to gradually develop a new, more literary, style:

> 'Insofar as I am able, I want to develop an objective method—but slowly—to the point where I can carry an audience over into a genuine dramatic, even melodramatic, novel, written in a very vivid and pungent style, but not slangy or overly vernacular.' (Hiney 15)

Chandler developed a somewhat fraught relationship with what he termed 'American style', openly struggling with the balance of its merits and shortcomings. As versus the English style of crime fiction he saw the *Black Mask* school as comparatively more honest,

capturing 'the authentic flavour of life as it is lived' (Chandler 56). However, his letters reveal an unsteady relationship with a prose style he came to regard as devoid of nuance:

> 'American style has no cadence. Without cadence a style has no harmonics. It is like a flute playing a solo, an incomplete thing' (Hiney 37),

and a genre lacking socio-political context:

> 'no awareness of the continuing stream of culture ... due to a lack of the historical sense' (36).

He also wrote against what he saw as the style's 'fondness for the faux naïf' saying that the limited vocabulary and sense of themselves possessed by the genre's characters was also a limitation to the fiction's possibilities.

> 'In the hands of a genius like Hemingway this may be effective, but only by subtly evading the terms of the contract, that is, by an artistic use of the telling detail which the speaker never would have noted.' (Hiney 36)

In writing the above letter in 1942 Chandler suggests that the success or failure of fiction employing the limited syntax and diction of minimalist prose is dependent on a deft authorial touch and an understanding that more must be provided for the reader than strict adherence to the narrator's perception would allow. It is Hemingway's 'genius' of omission that enables him to craft stories within the aesthetic that transcend the limitations of its vocabulary, whereas in the genre fiction of the same period a similar syntax is employed with more modest returns. Chandler himself moved away from the short-story format and towards novels and screenplays - formats that allowed him a broader canvas and a better chance to develop the 'genuine dramatic' style he wished for. His 1953 novel *The Big Sleep* is often credited with the popularising of a more socially-conscious breed of detective.

By 1946, in another letter to Blanche Knopf, Chandler had even revised his opinion of Hemingway, whom he had been re-reading:

> ‘Ninety per cent of it is the goddamndest self-imitation. He never really wrote but one story. All the rest is the same thing in different places - or without different parts.’ (Hiney 66)

It is interesting that Chandler writes ‘without’ as opposed to ‘with’, as though chiding his predecessor for his tendency to cut deeper and omit more as Chandler was seeking a fuller fiction of his own.

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II: The Core of Minimalism

To the extent that minimalism is recognised as a discrete literary mode it is virtually synonymous with the work of Raymond Carver, and particularly with the short stories comprising his collections *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976), *Furious Seasons and Other Stories* (1977), and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981). Carver's prose in this period is characterised by its simplicity of sentence structure, and a tonal flatness that employs almost no adjectives or adverbs; his characters, and particularly his narrators, are commonly blue-collar men who display a detectable level of detachment from their surrounding society.

This flatness of prose, combined with an attention to the personal sphere of domestic affairs grew in popularity in the late 70s to the extent that critics saw the rise of a new fiction, of which Carver was held emblematic. Its relative sparseness saw it phrased in terms of 'a formal reaction to the literary forms of the immediate past, to the baroque, long-winded projects of postmodernists with their labyrinthine plots' (Nesset 5). And alongside this rise of a subtler style came a resurgence in the format that accommodated it so well, such that Jay McInerney argues Carver's example 'reinvigorated realism as well as the short-story form'. And just as Carver can be seen as the figurehead of the minimalist movement, so one publication seems, in retrospect, to have assumed the role of its rightful home. *The New Yorker*, by the early to mid 1980s was, as Kim Herzinger puts it, 'for good or ill the heftiest magazine publisher of short fiction in these United States' (7).

Contemporary complaints that minimalism had monopolised the short story market often focussed on *The New Yorker* particularly, and commonly echoed the sentiments reported by Roland Sodowsky: that the stories 'had taken over' the publication's output by 1985 (529). By Sodowsky's analysis, however, this was never the case. He marks the appearance of two stories by Ann Beattie in *The New Yorker* ('Dwarf House' & 'Wanda's'), and the publication of Carver's 'Collectors' in *Esquire* as the dawning, in 1975, of minimalist prose in the magazine market. Then, utilising Herzinger's guidelines for recognising minimalist

fiction[3], Sodowsky proceeds to analyse *The New Yorker*'s short fiction content for the subsequent years. His findings suggest that the style was at its most prevalent in the early 1980s with 12 relevant stories appearing in both 1981 and 1982, and 14 in 1983. The number almost halves over the next three years before dwindling to just one story in 1988 that Sodowsky considers minimalist. Taking into account the 1,094 stories published by the magazine in the decade as a whole, Sodowsky's finding is that only 8% of them can properly be considered minimalist in style.

The statistics, however, do not change the common perception that minimalism, and particularly the minimalist short story, was a literary force with some momentum in the early 80s. Carver's debut collection in 1976 had not sold well but had been listed for the National Book Award, leading to better sales and more recognition in the following years. It was with the immediate critical reception of 1981's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, and the resultant commercial success that the book enjoyed, that Carver's reputation was cemented. The popularising of the minimalist mode would be inextricably linked with his name, such that writing in 1995 Kirk Nesset considered Carver to be, 'in light of recent trends in American writing, the most imitated American writer since Hemingway' (2).

Whilst some critics seek to position Carver in relation to writers who immediately precede him—as Morris Dickstein does when he writes that 'Carver's famous minimalism is a post-Beckett realism that has been through the forge of modernist skepticism and despair' (quoted in Hallett 58)—the more common consensus is that the strongest line of influence leads directly back to Hemingway. Cynthia Hallett, for example, considers Carver's early work the 'culmination' of Hemingway's influence on the short story (41).

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[3] see Introduction

Examination of Carver's style bears out the truth of this comparison. The purposefully limited vocabulary with which the narratorial voice is endowed is an obvious similarity. Clarity is at a premium in the descriptions, and the narration has a rhythm dictated by both the limited use of punctuation and the frequent repetition of words as opposed to the use of synonyms. There is also a structural similarity in that, like Hemingway, Carver leaves room in his text for the reader's interpretation, insisting upon their active engagement. This is one function of Carver's sparse use of punctuation, especially with regard to his narrators' inner voice which Hallet argues 'impedes the reader's task and slows the rate of comprehension—the reader must adjust associations and reallocate words' (61-2). The technique functions in a similar manner to Hemingway's reliance on discrete, simple sentences within which the reader is presented with a clear hierarchy of meaning and importance in place of more complex sentence structures. Being forced to make these judgements as one reads is one commonality between Hemingway and Carver's works.

In Jay McInerney's opinion the main difference between Hemingway and Carver's styles is that the latter 'completely dispensed with the romantic egoism that made the Hemingway idiom such an awkward model for other writers in the late 20th century'. In place of Hemingway's capable hunters and fisherman, who, depressed or lonely as they may have been, still had powers of agency in their worlds, Carver peoples his stories largely with the disaffected and powerless. Inkeeping with McInerney's accusation of romanticism, we might note a hint of something like optimism in the resolutions to some Hemingway stories: the almost elegiac final sentence of 'Indian Camp' for example, and its counterpoint in Nick Adams' decision not to walk deeper into the 'Big Two-Hearted River'. When Nick and Bill enjoy whisky by a fire in 'The Three Day Blow' they do so with an intensity of pleasure unknown to the occupants of Carver's stories. The removal of egoism then, also sees the dulling of the romantic impulse as a whole. Nesset points out that the frequent use of the descriptor 'good' in Hemingway's writing is replaced in Carver's by 'okay'. He reads this as a sign that 'the romantic core at the centre of Hemingway's modernist vocabulary is now officially dead' (35).

Likewise another of Hemingway's techniques is imported and altered in Carver's fiction: omission - implemented far more strongly in Carver's short-stories than was evident in the hardboiled style that borrowed Hemingway's syntax. In a 1981 piece for *The New York Times* Carver expresses strikingly similar opinions to Hemingway about the role of material absent from the work:

> 'What creates tension in a piece of fiction is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it's also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things.'

But Carver's stories are perhaps even more reliant on inference than Hemingway's. The critical opinion that holds minimalism to be a form comprised of only middles begins in earnest with Carver. Many of his stories, and those of writers like Ann Beattie who follow, take place in one location with the reader entering part way through a scene and exiting before a resolution is reached. As a result Carver's characters learn very little and change hardly at all during the course of our time with them, and the relative lack of insight into their natures is also figured in the language, which renders their perceptions. '[Carver's] stories are so clean,' writes Hallett, 'that there is no trace of the author; there is barely a narrator' (48).

The Carver narrator as far as we get to know him is commonly a blue-collar, uneducated male with dissociative tendencies (often but not always related to alcohol dependency or depression). The tonal flatness of their narration is connotative of their unwillingness or inability to express their true feelings, and as a result of this emotional repression they are prone to what Nesset terms a tendency to be 'overcome by violence in their personal frustrations' (33). This emotional suppression has its precedents in both Hemingway and the hardboiled writers, but there is also an extent to which it is drawn from Carver's own experience. 'A little autobiography and a lot of imagination are best' (207) he told Mona Simpson in 1983, indicating that he considered his strength to be writing out of what he knew either situationally or temperamentally.

Tone is not static however, even amongst the first three of Carver's collections. Whilst virtually none of the inhabitants of 1976's *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* could be called content, the characters of 1981's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* are, argues Kirk Nesset, '[i]ntimidated now rather than timid, embittered as well as dismayed' (31). And as Carver increases the emotional stakes there is also a further reduction of the language employed. The third collection's opening story, 'Why Don't You Dance?', is an example of Carver's prose at its leanest, lowest ebb. At a little over six pages it is comprised of nothing but blank description and dialogue pitched at a low emotional volume, and though the incident it describes is not entirely mundane the story and its characters make no effort to push its possible meaning on the reader; the closing lines explicitly have the female character give up on doing so.

When considering Carver's prose style and the structure of his stories, and particularly when thinking about the evolution from the first three collections to the latter part of his career, the presence of Carver's editor Gordon Lish must be keenly felt. Correspondence between the two reveals a changing relationship within which Carver was often unhappy with the balance of power. In the early going the author expressed his willingness to take any and all editorial direction. Writing to Lish as the then editor of *Esquire*, in advance of the publication of his story 'Collectors', Carver says, 'I will leave it up to you & you tell me what you think needs done or doing' (Carver 2007). And even as late as May 1980 Carver was open about his appreciation for what Lish's editorial skills brought to the stories: 'For Christ's sweet sake, not to worry about taking a pencil to the stories if you can make them better; and if anyone can you can'. It was during the final editing process for the third collection however, that the relationship began to strain. Side-by-side comparison of Carver's original texts of stories from *What We Talk About*... and Lish's edited versions—possible since the 2010 publication of the former as a separate volume titled *Beginners*—

reveals a truly startling amount of alterations: entire paragraphs deleted, endings substantially rewritten, and, just as tellingly, a notable increase in repetition with particular regard to pronouns.[4] As edited by Lish the volume of stories was less than half of its original length, and many of the elements of Carver's minimalism at its most streamlined and iconic take shape in this editing process. Giles Harvey, in a review of *Beginners*, assesses the transformation thus:

> 'Carver's original text, it turns out, is dense with sentimentality and melodrama. Lish sensed a leaner, quieter, more agile book trapped inside the manuscript and he hacked away briskly until he was satisfied he'd found it.'

In a long, emotionally fraught letter of 8 Jul 1980 Carver pleads with Lish to allow many of the stories to stand substantially as he had written them. He repeatedly states that should the stories appear in their edited form he would lose his soul and mental health. He writes:

> 'I'm afraid, mortally afraid, I feel it, that if the book were to be published as it is in its present edited form, I may never write another story, that's how closely, God Forbid, some of those stories are to my sense of regaining my health and mental well-being.'
> (Carver 2007)

In the same letter Carver is not reticent in acknowledging his debt to Lish—'if I have any standing or reputation or credibility in the world, I owe it to you'—but he worries openly about how the dramatically reduced versions of the stories will be perceived by those to whom he has already shown original drafts: 'How can I explain to these fellows when I see them, as I will see them, what happened to the story in the meantime, after its book publication?'. This concern for his reputation, and for the state of his stories as linked to his health, did not dissuade Lish who published them in the form that we know despite the author's protestations. It seems that he was able to convince Carver of the correctness of his stance, possibly by appealing to the part of him that had written 'I see what it is that

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[4] see also *The New Yorker*'s 'Beginners, Edited' feature (in bibliography) for a visually striking comparison of the collection's title story

you've done, what you've pulled out of it, and I'm awed and astonished, startled even, with your insights'. Just a week after his rambling letter begging that the presses be halted Carver was again writing to Lish to say that he was 'thrilled about the book and its impending publication. I'm stoked about it'. However, he still finds room to admit that his 'greatest fear is, or was, having them too pared', and despite having won him over on this occasion Lish would again find himself facing similar complaints from Carver during the preparation of the next collection: *Cathedral*.

This time Carver's tactic was to be pre-emptive: 'one thing is certain,' he wrote to Lish on 11 Aug 1982, 'the stories in this new collection are going to be fuller than the ones in the earlier books'. He expressed, in the strongest terms, his refusal to subject the material to 'surgical amputation and transplant'. And once the partnership is rescinded, Carver's fiction, absent Lish's influence, does become less minimal and more conventional: silences reduce in number, dialogue is often looser rather than pointed, and the emotional volume is turned up. Of writing the fourth collection's title story Carver said, 'There was an opening up when I wrote the story. I knew I'd gone as far the other way as I could or wanted to go, cutting everything down to the marrow, not just to the bone. Any father in that direction and I'd be at a dead end' (Simpson 210). It is perhaps also true that the Carver of *Cathedral* is a better writer than the Carver of the earlier collections. Despite their relative fullness and the broadening of their emotional range the stories of *Cathedral* are not bloated by the sentimentality present in many of the pre-Lish drafts for *What We Talk About*.... Carver has perhaps adopted some of the lessons learned from Lish's having presented him with a leaner template, and *Cathedral* inhabits a comfortable middle ground between *Beginners*' sentiment and the marrow-deep restraint of the third collection as published.

In a 1983 *Paris Review* interview Carver speaks of his discomfort with being labelled a minimalist, saying that the term 'smacks of smallness of vision' (Simpson 210). The publication that year of *Cathedral* marks a move away from many of the stylistic connotations that had grown up around that term. One particularly notable example of this trend in Carver's career is the inclusion in *Cathedral* of a story titled 'A Small Good Thing',

which is a rewriting of 'The Bath' from the previous collection, this time expanded to more than three times its original length and rendered with a fuller diction and a brighter emotional tone.

It is difficult to assess the relative influence of Carver's earlier and late work. The constricted prose and Hemingway-esque reliance on inference in place of explication is easier to spot amongst the writers who followed, but the evolution of this style, its partial opening up into something more emotive, may have been just as inspiring. Morris Dickstein, in a 1991 critique titled 'The Pursuit of the Ordinary' warns us of what he perceived as the negative impact of the former:

> 'What these trendy writers learned from Carver—or rather, misunderstood in him—proved disastrous for them. He taught them to focus on observed details, to listen for snatches of revealing talk, as all writers must. But somehow (like the early imitators of Hemingway) they came to believe that the essence of fiction was leaving things out, not only literary texture but the shaping of a plot, not only psychology and description but all emotional involvement. No matter what happened, they seemed too cool to care or too damaged to react. They avoided the easy pattern of anecdotal complication and epiphany of the traditional story but had little but sheer sensation to substitute; their random slices of life were too thin to be nourishing.' (510)

One such successor to Carver, whose work provides an interesting comparison is his near-contemporary: Amy Hempel. Although unpublished until 1985 Hempel had been learning the craft of writing fiction in Gordon Lish's classes at Columbia for a decade beforehand. Hempel has said that Lish's work as an author and an editor were inspirational to her: 'At *Esquire* in the seventies and, later, at Knopf, he was publishing the voices that interested me most. I felt allied with his choices,' she said in a 2003 interview with *The Paris Review*, naming Carver and Mary Robison in particular (Winner 36-7). Whilst some reviewers have viewed Hempel's work in terms of a continuation of the 1920's 'lost generation' aesthetic, Hempel herself has only drawn a line back to Hemingway via Carver's influence:

> 'Carver was a Hemingway fan and Carver became a great influence in the eighties and into the nineties on almost everything. I admired him, hugely, but that's the only connection I make myself.' (Winner 46)

Carver's influence is felt both in certain of Hempel's stylistic choices, and in her characters' frequent dissociative states and their confusion. Another potential source for some of the Hemingway-esque notes in her work is perhaps her own background in journalism. Like Hemingway she recalls the usefulness of the profession's guidelines, saying that as she found the idea of writing fiction daunting in the beginning she chose journalism 'because there were rules I could learn' (Winner 34). In particular she learned the same lesson as was taught to Hemingway by the *Star* style guide: 'You are trained to get rid of anything nonessential' (35). Hempel also credited journalism with the development of her powers of observation, allowing her to 'see the salient points of any situation,' which she employed in her fiction as an ability to 'select the one thing that will tell you the most about a character' (49). This trait would come to define Hempel's fiction: not just the elimination of the extraneous but the distillation of the salient into sentences of incredible density.

Reviews of Hempel's debut collection, *Reasons to Live* (1985), often focussed on the assuredness of her style: her use of first person narrators and the present tense, a preference for implication over explication, and detail rather than event are all markers of her place in the minimalist lineage. In a critique otherwise quite suspicious of minimalism, referring to its worst examples as 'a kind of fraudulent tic that serves to hide a vacuum or defend against feeling', Sheila Ballantyne wrote in the *New York Times Book Review* that Hempel 'has succeeded in revealing both the substance and intelligence beneath the surface of a spare, elliptical prose'. This was minimalism done right, Ballantyne suggests, 'a kind of minimalism that robs us of nothing, that has room for the largest themes; the best of these stories have a compression that seems to capture it all'.

The building blocks of Hempel's fiction, Paul Winner suggests, are 'the packed sentence, the mutability of voice, the suggestive and highly condensed moment' (32). Despite her use of a comparatively broad diction it is this genius of contraction which often sees Hempel in receipt of the label 'minimalist'. She has expressed some reservations about the term, telling Paul Winner that it 'had meaning in the art world, but quickly became meaningless and pejorative when applied to literature'. In Hempel's assessment the word 'came to

denote what certain reviewers felt was missing in fiction—conventional plot or obvious emotion' (44). The obvious, indeed, is often absent from Hempel's fiction, which retains the minimalist preference for implication over explicit statement. Emotion, however, is often central to the stories, and is present in ways foreign to the male writers we have looked at so far.

One story in *Reasons to Live* received particularly effusive praise from many critics, and has been widely anthologised since publication. Written in memoriam of a friend, 'In The Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried' serves as a good example of Hempel's preoccupation with the construction of stories. '"Tell me things I won't mind forgetting,"' says the terminally ill friend at the story's centre, '"Make it useless stuff or skip it"' (Hempel 29). This edict, as prominent as she could make it—the first sentence of the first story in her first collection—is a bold inversion of Hempel's true feelings about the construction of fiction, wherein every word and every sentence is essential. This is figured in the story itself by the narrator's self-awareness of her function as a storyteller, concerned with the narrative's composition. Whilst passing time at the hospital during her friend's last days the story's narrator tell us: 'I review those things that will figure in the retelling' (39). There is an awareness here of the artificiality of narrative, together with an idea that the raising of that artificiality as a subject within the fiction helps secure against it. This is something which is taken to far greater extent in a story from Hempel's subsequent collection *At the Gates of the Animal Kingdom* (1990).

'The Harvest' was originally published by Gordon Lish in a 1987 issue of *Quarterly*, uniquely in two parts: the fictionalised version within the body of the magazine, and the allegedly more truthful second part as a letter to the editor. It appears in the 1990 collection as one piece, with the narrative voice shifting halfway through as it steps back from the telling of the story and speaks instead of the manner in which the story is told:

> 'I leave a lot out when I tell the truth. The same when I write a story. I'm going to start now to tell you what I left out of 'The Harvest,' and maybe begin to wonder why I had to leave it out.' (Hempel 106)

This metafictional component again draws attention to the artificiality of narrative, and in this case openly addresses its shortcomings. The narrator in the second half, the reader is liable to assume, is a more or less directly channelled Hempel, who had been involved in a road accident very similar to the one depicted in the piece's first section. She laments the constraints of the fictionalised version, telling us that the events as they really happened were too full of strange coincidence and irony, the inclusion of which in the fictional account would have been dismissed by the reader as too neat or unlikely. 'This is the version that has room for perfect irony' (108) she says of the allegedly non-fictional portion. Of a detail she admits to having changed in the fiction she asks the reader openly: 'Would you have accepted this in 'The Harvest'?'. And, having altered a character—with whom the narrator is romantically involved—from unmarried in reality to married within the fiction she points out the effect to us:

> '[W]hen you thought he had a wife, wasn't I liable to do anything? And didn't I have it coming?' (108)

This is the most direct example of a trait running through Hempel's fiction: a deep concern with the mechanics of story. Her having altered allegedly true details in the interest of making the fiction more acceptable to an audience as realistic shows a reverence for the atomic elements of her fiction's construction. The sentence is still the unit by which Hempel would prefer her fiction be measured; she told Paul Winner 'Writing conducted at the sentence level has always made perfect sense to me' (40). And it is her sentences that are most often praised. Rick Moody, in his introduction to 2006's *The Collected Stories*, sums up Hempel's fiction thus:

> 'It's all about the sentences. […] It's about ambiguity. […] It's about instants of consciousness. […] It's against sentimentality.' (Hempel xi)

An excellent example of much of what Moody is driving at comes in the form of a sentence from 'In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried'. After the majority of the story has been

spent in a hospital room, waiting for the narrator's friend to die, the death itself is not related directly in the text; it is something that happens somewhere off the page. And not only is the fact of the friend's death not addressed directly, it is relegated to the status of a subordinate clause:

> 'On the morning she was moved to the cemetery, the one where Al Jolson is buried, I enrolled in a 'Fear of Flying' class.' (39)

This sentence, which forms half of a paragraph contained on either side by double-spaced paragraph breaks characteristic of Hempel's stories, plays against the reader's expectations. Having read up to this moment it is natural to expect some treatment of the friend's death in the text; in traditional narrative construction it would be the central event of the piece. Here, however, Hempel presents it in a manner that asks the reader to discern its relative importance in comparison to the sentence's other information: that the cemetery is also the site of Al Jolson's grave, and that the narrator is engaged in some self improvement. The comparison to Hemingway here is stark. In one regard Hempel, in allowing events to occur outside of the fiction and yet remain present *within* it by virtue of their felt effects, is employing a technique familiar from Hemingway's fiction. On a syntactic level however, she has achieved this with recourse to a complex (and confusing) sentence structure that fails the minimalist test of clear language and, in the relatively rare case of complex sentence structure, clauses which directly support one another's meaning. The fact that the reader is required to make a contribution to uncovering the narrative's truth will be familiar to the reader of Hemingway. The obstacle in his work however, was more often comprehension of links between simple, individual sentences with defined meanings. Here something different is asked of us: to parse the emotional truth of a complex sentence with competing units of information. Nevertheless, Hempel's explanation is familiar from Cather and Hemingway:

> 'There's a way in which a writer does not have to spell things out, and the reader will get it. There's a way in which the mind works to impose meaning and order automatically on seemingly random bits of information, so you can almost offer these bits up[...] and trust the reader to make some sense of it.' (Sapp 88)

Hempel's attention to the architecture of a story is present at every level of her fiction. Her aforementioned tendency to use paragraph breaks, and in particular ones with large spacing, she explains partly in terms of avoiding the use of clumsy transitions: 'A space break makes a clean segue whereas some segues you try to write sound convenient, contrived' (Winner 43). It is also a matter of delineating the discrete elements of a text. As with her contemporaries Carver and (perhaps especially) Ann Beattie, Hempel is engaged in the presentation of pieces of a truth, the reassembly of which into a cohesive whole is the task of the attentive reader. As we have seen, in opposition to its clarity of language, it is minimalism's *modus operandi* to leave out or obscure the parts which complete its pictures. The best minimalist works, as Ballantyne notes above, 'have a compression that seems to capture it all' - even that which is not explicit in the text. Or, as Rick Moody phrases it, 'the excisions, the margins, in Hempel stories have often been as telling as what occurs within' (Hempel xvi). In order to do this effectively however, the author must assist the reader in their task. Rather than the wilful obfuscation with which they are regularly charged in negative critical appraisals, Hempel is emblematic of the minimalist author's attentiveness to the reader. Again, of her paragraph breaks she says:

> 'If used honestly and not as a gimmick, these spaces can signify the way the mind really works, noting moments and assembling them in such a way that a kind of logic or pattern comes forward, until the accretion of moments forms a whole experience, observation, state of being.' (Winner 43)

This is a furtherance of her preoccupation with the dynamics of her fiction. 'The connective tissue of a story is often the white space, which is not empty,' she argues, reciting the established minimalist belief that 'what you don't say can be as important as what you do say'. Central to her mode of composition, she says, is giving the reader 'credit for being able to understand without you having to say it' (Winner 43-4). This is something which only grows in Hempel's writing as she continues. The third collection, *Tumble Home* (1997), contains a single-sentence story titled 'Housewife':

> 'She would always sleep with her husband and with another man in the course of the same day, and then the rest of the day, for whatever was left to her of that day, she would exploit by incanting, "*French* film, *French* film."' (Hempel 221, her emph.)

The language here is richly allusive to the emotional truths behind the description. The use of 'always' speaks to the act's habitual nature; 'whatever was left to her' connotes the woman's perceived lack of agency, from which we can infer that the act has an element of rebellion to it; concurrently 'exploit' speaks to her idea of empowering herself, and her 'incanting' tells us of the guilt she nevertheless feels, and that she attempts to quench it by making the whole thing sound exotic and unreal. This is a good example of what Moody means when he says that 'Hempel sentences, with their longing and their profound disquiet, do not rage or posture the way the men of the minimalist realist period did. They ache' (Hempel xii).

Moody, by the time of *Tumble Home*, considers Hempel a 'miniaturist' (xv), and speaks of the 'nearly Japanese compaction the further along she goes in her work' (xiii). Despite the fact that the collection's title story is her longest piece to date, his opinion is borne out in the relentless distillation of her sentences. There is, however, something of an expansion of theme and emotional variety in the later collections. It is not until 2005's *The Dog of the Marriage* that sex features prominently within Hempel's fiction, and there is a blossoming of the 'tonal complexity' (Hallett 83) that was present even in her earlier work when compared to the male writers we have considered. But if there is room for a little more self-reflection on the part of the later stories' characters, there is still the same attention to details and to language. Images still stand in for inferred states of mind or turns of events not made explicit. Though there is perhaps more present on the page, the impact of what is absent is felt as keenly: what Moody terms omission 'of such magnitude that the story is bent by its force' (Hempel xvi).

Hempel's place within the minimalist lineage is an interesting one. More engaged with the business of emotions than is the case with Hemingway or Carver she nevertheless employs similar tools in her composition of minutely wound sentences, the true power of which is

available to the reader allusively rather than directly. 'The two things I want,' she told Paul Winner, 'are interesting language and genuine feeling' (51). The latter, though it is perhaps slightly more overt in her work than we have seen elsewhere, links her to other minimalists by virtue of her insistence on the 'genuine': the writers we have looked at are interested in nothing else. Her desire for 'interesting language' is more problematic. Hempel employs a wider, more emotionally complex vocabulary than her predecessors, but the consistent—even increasing—compaction of her all important sentences frame that choice as a direct evolution of the minimalist aesthetic.

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III: The Criticism of Minimalism

Just as the explosion in the market for magazines toward the end of the 19th century had popularised the short story format and gestated the minimal styles of Hemingway and the hardboiled writers, the renaissance of the short story as a literary mode in the 1980s and the emergence of a new minimal style are interdependent phenomena. Writing in 1986 John Barth considered the arrival of this new minimalism 'the principle' behind 'the most impressive phenomenon on the current (North American, especially the United States) literary scene'. This he defined, with recourse to the kind of parenthetical indeterminacy common to discussions of the genre, as:

> 'the new flowering of the (North) American short story (in particular the kind of terse, oblique, realistic or hyperrealistic, slightly plotted, extrospective, cool-surfaced fiction associated in the last 5 to 10 years with such excellent writers as Frederick Barthelme, Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason, James Robison, Mary Robison and Tobias Wolff'

In the absence of a publishing revolution on par with the advent of the railroad and cheaper printing, some argued that the rising popularity of the short story was driven in part by the increasing ubiquity of television, and the concomitant reduction of attention spans and increased acceptance of narratives of reduced quality. In his 1992 critique *Talents and Technicians* John W. Aldridge goes one step further to state that owing to technological advances 'human relations have become increasingly ephemeral and superficial' and that minimalism was a mode suited to a society 'as migratory emotionally as they are physically' (57).

Much of the negative criticism of minimalism sought to establish a relationship with the modernism that preceded it wherein the newer mode was a reduction of an established style. Aldridge argues that 'two important modernist developments have effectively come to an end in the work of [the minimalists]: the great tradition of realistic protest... and the equally great tradition of technical innovation and experiment' (33). Minimalism's narrower focus was read as a lessening of ambition, and its reduced vocabulary and

complexity seen as indicative of its authors' lesser talents. But the exact relationship of minimalism to modernism, and to postmodernism, remained contentious. Heide Ziegler, in 1991, suggested that it was a matter of re-branding: 'the word 'postmodernism' is dying,' she says 'something like minimalism... will succeed postmodernism and become the new standard term to describe these writers' (Scholes 257). Likewise, Cynthia Hallett sees a complex relationship of shared interests amongst the forms:

> 'Literary minimalism has a strong affiliation with realism; but, in addition, since the concepts of 'surfaces' and 'disconnections' characterize the postmodern rendering of experience, literary minimalism displays an affinity with post-modernism as well. Thus, minimalism appears internally divided, driven at the same time to representation and abstraction, to tradition and experiment.' (Hallett 20)

In his introduction to a special issue of the *Mississippi Review* in 1985, Kim Herzinger argues that the differences are perhaps better seen as matters of degree. He lists some of the defining characteristics of postmodernism—'irony, self-relexiveness, conspicuous structural invention, overt concern with the limitations of language, and the reflection of traditional story lines'—and judges that they are 'backgrounded in the new fiction. Backgrounded, I say, not rejected.' (12). And by the same token we are urged not to view minimalism as a homogenous mass but to see within it the works of individuals. Herzinger suggests that whilst the majority of minimalists at least 'assimilated the Postmodernist concern with the language act', the 'more evident playfulness' present in the work of Frederick Barthelme, for example, includes a more 'conscious revision and extension of Postmodern tendencies' (13-14).

It was Barthelme who published something approaching a defence of minimalism in an April 1988 edition of *The New York Times*, within which he positions the form as having inherited from both modernism and postmodernism. He places all three in opposition to the presumed superiority of realism, which he indicts as 'full of lies, falsifications of experience for the sake of drama - which was paradoxical, since it purported to be representation'. It is the methods of combating this falsity which differentiate the subsequent forms for Barthelme. Postmodernism's 'playful, clever, self-conscious, surface-

oriented writing' having become 'too easy and tired', and rejecting the option to 'revert to 'realist' writing', the minimalists embraced Raymond Carver's revelation that 'if you could do anything, you could do nothing'. The result, 'a combining of postmodernist sensibility and tactics with 'realistic' characters and representational narrative', Barthelme sees as 'a postmodern twist on realism' (Percesepe n. pag.).

Regardless of whether or not it came by virtue of an assumed reductive relationship to modernism, minimalism was frequently accused of slightness: of ambition, of scope, and of value. 'Almost everything that occurs on television is instantly forgettable, and so are most of the stories of, among others, Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie […] and Amy Hempel' charges Aldridge, considering their work 'bare minimalist reproductions of a reality so mundane and so completely unilluminated by language or theme that they never become valid subjects for fiction but remain the raw materials for a fiction that is yet to be written' (31). The minimalist commitment to the presentation of detail and surface was seen as a needless restriction that damned the narratives to incompleteness and the characters to unknowability; it was a fiction good only for 'the depiction largely of *moments* when something significant may or may not happen...' (Aldridge 152, my emph.).

This is an argument predicated upon the belief that the realist mode provides a more accurate portrait of people and situations, something that Barthelme argues against:

> 'Another realist fiction problem was that what passed for characterization was obedience to a set of literary conventions. People didn't froth as much in life as they did in realist fiction. People didn't pontificate a great deal. People were cagey and quiet, they kept things to themselves'

The characters of minimalist fiction then, are encountered by the reader in a far more natural manner, and are, ironically, rendered far more realistically. They do not project their socio-political biases or the contents of their biographies as nakedly as their counterparts in realist fictions, they are more believably guarded and prone to ineloquence. Much of the criticism of minimalism's characters for their slightness is based on a

misreading that applies the realist logic to the minimalist text: an expectation that all that comprised the character should be present on the page. There is a difference, however, between the characters' not having an inner life, and one not being rendered explicit in prose. Like Hemingway's iceberg the actions and dialogue of the character in the moment we spend with them is revelatory of all that is not present in writing. When the alcoholic father of Carver's 'One More Thing' takes the family's tube of toothpaste upon being forced out of the house it is enough to inform us of exactly what type of man he is without recourse to evaluative passages in the text.

Relatedly, criticism of the style's syntax and diction often developed along similar lines, with its relative lack of colour misread as nihilism. Aldridge argues that the language's 'paucity of evaluative nuance' is representative of the authors' belief 'that there is very little to be said for or about people because they and their lives are so utterly inconsequential' (32). Again we can charge Aldridge with having misread the minimalist dynamic, for not having engaged in the active participation that the form requires in its readers, and again we find his reading of the text freighted with expectations rooted in the realist mode. 'Nuance' is essentially the minimalist *modus operandi*, though in asking it to be 'evaluative' Aldridge misunderstands the style's ethos. Stemming from the roots of Hemingway's journalism and Hammett's work as a detective, the minimalist author and his narrator are not in the business of passing judgement. It is for this reason that the authorial presence is effaced from the text to the greatest degree possible. The sole remit of the mode's narratorial voice is the presentation of detail and fact, and what evaluation may take place is contained not within the text but within the mind of the reader as he reassembles the fiction's component pieces and supplies that which is missing. Thus, Cynthia Hallett suggests, a properly constructed minimalist fiction contains 'a pattern of meaning within the symbolic structure' (11), such that each piece speaks to the effect of the whole and nothing superfluous is included.

Another common misperception of the minimalist mode holds it in contempt for irony. There is something of this in Aldridge's comment (above) that it takes as its subject the

'utterly inconsequential' and yet dares to present it as suitable material for literature. Kim Herzinger warns of the effects of this misreading of minimalism's intent:

> 'To read the 'minimalists' as ironists makes their reticence appear to be coy; their presentation of 'ordinary,' especially domestic, situations appear to be sneak attacks on the culture…' (17)

In fact, argues Herzinger, it is minimalism's rejection of irony which is its key distinguishing feature among the post-realist modes:

> 'It seems to me that one of the crucial characteristics of 'minimalist' writing is its profound uneasiness with irony as a mode of presentation. Irony is, after all, the very tissue of 20th Century writing.' (14)

Barthelme even goes so far as to position minimalism's stance on irony in explicit opposition to postmodernism's, saying that 'once you'd been to the big 'all over' irony of the post-modern, you couldn't very well go back to the periodic'.

However, even if we are to accept that the style adequately renders characters and that its choice of language in doing so is neither ironic, nor necessarily reflective of the author's or character's nihilism, we must also contend with another aspect of the fiction's narrowness of scope. It is irrefutable that minimalism's domain is almost exclusively the exploration of personal circumstance; these are stories that take place at a human level, kept there regardless of whether they employ first or third person narration by the effective effacement of the narratorial presence. Minimalism has no place for the bird's eye view or the wide-angle lens, preferring to place the reader within the confines of the living room, kitchen, or hospital room in which the story takes place. This effective isolation of circumstance, itself partly a characteristic of the short-story format, has been perceived as self-centeredness. So Aldridge accuses the minimalists of writing from an 'ideologically impoverished background', and of being 'oblivious to the larger historical issues that so profoundly preoccupied their predecessors' (39). That minimalism presented smaller stories with a more personal frame of reference may have been acceptable however, if it

weren't for the perception that its authors had constructed it in a vacuum devoid of social context. In their snapshot fiction, the argument proceeds, minimalist writers 'tend to treat the personal life as if it were a phenomenon existing totally apart from society' (Aldridge 40), the end result being that through its engagement in an affectionless narcissism this introverted fiction produced nothing of relevance outside its narrow frame. Though frequently levelled at Carver and those who wrote alongside and after him this was by no means a new criticism. It echoes Raymond Chandler's comments of 1942 on the shortcomings of the 'American style': that it contained 'no awareness of the continuing stream of culture' and was possessed of 'a lack of the historical sense' (Hiney 36). But just as minimalism was not in the business of evaluative engagement with the material it presented to the reader, it was also not interested in supplying context. As Hallett phrases it, minimalism was an 'attempt to present experience rather than to talk about it' (2). There was an awareness in the works' construction that the reassembly of the material's reported elements by the reader would necessarily be influenced by the reader's own circumstance. The risk of writing too narrowly to be of any wider relevance was perhaps only as great as the risk of contextualising fiction so definitely that it was of no allegorical use to the reader. As the minimalists saw it the accurate presentation of the concrete, devoid of irony, at least held the possibility of revealing 'the world as reflected in the details of our routine lives' (Barthelme 2000, xvi).

It is interesting to note the frequency with which contemporary criticism of the 1970s' and 80s' minimalism contains either explicit or implied reverence for Hemingway. Aldridge refers to both Hemingway's 'complex minimalist artistry' (51) and Hempel's 'chronic minimalist constipation' (70), in terms that suggest not that one is an evolution of the other but that they are entirely distinct and qualitatively incomparable. Similarly he allows that in Hemingway's work the 'ghostly presence of the eliminated is absolutely vital' (49), but reads the similar use of omission by Carver as 'compelling the reader to do the writer's imagining for him' (55). Viewed charitably this may be seen as another result of the difficulty there has been in establishing a definitive place for minimalism in the literary landscape of the late 20th century. More realistically it represents a reluctance on the part

of a critical community for whom Hemingway was an accepted master to admit the relevance of new work which they misread as unambitious, depthless and ironically delivered. In truth the work of the man honoured by the 1954 Nobel Committee for 'the influence that he has exerted on contemporary style', would continue to resonate through the remainder of the century, and beyond. Frederick Barthelme concludes his good natured defence of his work and that of his contemporaries with some advice to the writer accused of minimalism, in which he makes an appeal both for the efficacy of its dynamics and for the recognition of its traditional aspects:

> 'tell them you prefer to think you're not filling the bus with a lot of orthodoxy, a lot of ripe opinion and 'historically' certified political and intellectual cant. Tell them that you prefer to think you're leaving room for the readers, at least for the ones who like to use their imaginations; that you hope those readers hear the whispers, catch the feints and shadows, gather the traces, sense the pressures, and that meanwhile the prose tricks them into the drama, and the drama breaks their hearts. Just like old times.'

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IV: The State of Minimalism

As we have observed in the writing careers of, amongst others, Hemingway, Chandler, and Carver, a close adherence to the principles of minimalism is often something that is most notable in an author's early work, and which they develop away from. The more common evolution of writing style tends to be an expansion, with Beckett's progressive simplification and Hempel's noticeable constriction being relatively rare exceptions. Writing in 1991, Morris Dickstein hypothesised that Carver's move away from minimalism was itself a sign of the form coming to an end:

> 'Its exhaustion is now encouraging a return to a more expansive, more full-bodied fiction, a fiction in which some larger world surrounds our individual lives, a fiction at once more intricately written, more richly emotional, and more densely political.' (512-3)

The fiction of the 1990s retained some traces of the minimalist gene, for example in the passionless, descriptive narratorial voice of Cormac McCarthy's *All The Pretty Horses* (1992). But the revival of the short-story had not retained momentum into the new century, and to an increasing extent the novelistic output displayed minimalist tendencies only in strangely warped forms. The charges of nihilism which were levelled at Jay McInerney and Bret Easton Ellis (with the latter's *American Psycho* (1991) being the lightning rod) were familiar from the previous decade's critique of minimalism. However, despite some stylistic inheritance—a tonal evenness and penchant for brand names—the narratives were too gaudy and the narrators too opinionated for the works to be considered alongside the vignettes of Carver and Hempel.

Had it been possible to disregard the expansive vocabulary in which they were written David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) and Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) both displayed a minimalist attention to detail, and a belief in its capacity for revelation. However, the novels were defined equally by their colossal scope, and their authors' interest in the interrelation of their complex fictional worlds' component parts. They were

novels that incorporate minimalism only by virtue of their verticality: their engagement with the micro and the macro both.

The minimalist strain was perhaps more clearly present in the work of Nicholson Baker, whose short novels displayed a similar interest in detail at a more familiar scale. Employing the form of first person monologues, Baker's fiction takes place at the human level of the telephone call (*Vox* (1992)) or the fireside reminiscence (*A Box of Matches* (2003)) and is firmly grounded in concrete detail. As with DeLillo or Wallace the vocabulary is massively expanded from that of Hemingway or Carver, but that alone is not enough to exclude the work entirely from the minimalist lineage: Hempel's prose has more colour than Carver's, and Richard Ford, for example, is far more lyrical than either. What positions Baker as a *skewed* minimalist is the mindset of his narrators and the resultant tone of his prose. Detail is used synecdochally in Baker's fiction, but it is not done allusively as by many minimalists: Baker's project is magnification and amplification. There is no detachment (ironic, nihilistic, or otherwise) in Baker's novels, and emotional response on the narrator's part is felt powerfully all throughout the work. A prime example comes from his 1988 novel *The Mezzanine*, in which the narrator celebrates the concept of perforation:

> 'Perforation! Shout it out! The deliberate punctuated weakening of paper and cardboard so that it will tear along an intended path, leaving a row of fine-haired white pills or tuftlets on each new edge!' (74 n.1)

The fact that this comes as part of a page-length footnote is also argument against Baker's minimalist status, reliance on such apparatus drawing too much unwanted attention to the authorial presence.

Another strain of the minimalist mutation was present in the work of Chuck Palahniuk, whose debut novel *Fight Club* drew comparison to DeLillo in a cover quote from Bret Easton Ellis upon publication in 1996. Palahniuk, who has documented his practice extensively in interviews, and in essays written for his website, studied writing under Tom Spanbauer, himself a former student of Gordon Lish's at Columbia. Spanbauer's adapted

minimalism, which he terms 'Dangerous Writing', thus stems from core minimalism *per* Lish and develops in some interesting directions. First, an insistence on the constant adherence to themes is reminiscent of the minimalist edict to include nothing superfluous:

> 'In minimalism, a story is a symphony, building and building, but never losing the original melody line. All characters and scenes, things that seem dissimilar, they all illustrate some aspect of the story's theme.' (Palahniuk 2002, n.pag.)

The attention to how language can impact the reader's cognition is also inherited from Carver et al, with Spanbauer instructing his students on how to write with what he called a 'burnt tongue':

> 'A way of saying something, but saying it wrong, twisting it to slow down the reader. Forcing the reader to read close, maybe read twice, not just skim along a surface of abstract images, short-cut adverbs, and clichés.'

Also present is the distrust of abstracts, which Palahniuk exemplified with reference to the opening line of Amy Hempel's 'The Harvest', which eschews impersonal measurement in favour of a construction that allows insight into the character:

> 'The year I began to say *vahz* instead of *vase*, a man I barely knew nearly accidentally killed me.' (Hempel 103, her emph.)

Spanbauer's 'Dangerous Writing' is a toolkit for a style designed to work directly on the reader, and a large part of this is the fiction's refusal to pass judgement. Minimalism's reverence for the power of detail is retained, as well as the insistence that the reader play an active role by parsing those details into meaning. As Palahniuk phrases it:

> 'Nothing is fed to the reader as fat or happy. You can only describe actions and appearances in a way that makes a judgment occur in the reader's mind. Whatever it is, you unpack it into the details that will re-assemble themselves within the reader.'

Despite these formal inheritances however, in Palahniuk's fiction the tools of Spanbauer's adapted minimalism are often employed in the telling of stories too vibrant and violent for

the minimalist canon. At novel length Palahniuk's interest in unconventional narrative structures (a collection of short stories within a framing device (Haunted (2005)); a journal (Diary (2003)); linear inversion of plot (Survivor (1999))) again moves him too far from the straight-ahead ethos of minimalism, and throws too much of a spotlight onto the author. Even his short stories traffick too freely in the subject matter of human grotesquery, and are often constructed with too neat a resolution in comparison to the open-ended snapshots of Carver et al. Both of these qualities perhaps suggest an ancestry more correctly attributable to hardboiled genre fiction than to Hemingway.

Arguably the traces of the minimalist gene become even fainter in much of the literary landscape of the 21st century's opening decade. DeLillo and McCarthy produced thinner volumes with more distilled language, but the social realism of novels such as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) gained increasing prevalence, alongside big, familial novels such as those of Jonathan Franzen (*The Corrections* (2001)). Events of the early century inspired an outward-looking fiction interested in multinational culture and engaged with politics (Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003), Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2006); Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008) amongst many others). Even the traditionally self-prepossessed form of the personal memoir was exploded into something formally inventive and grander in scale by Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000).

A strain of minimalism survived in the cinema, where cheaper and increasingly accessible digital technology made possible the production of small, personal stories on a miniscule budget. A series of independently produced films, frequently taking as their subject matter a dissociated, ineloquent individual or group of individual young people, came to be regarded collectively under the label of 'mumblecore' (*The Puffy Chair* (2005), *Me and You and Everyone we Know* (2005), *Tiny Furniture* (2011) etc.). There were also signs of this sensibility reaching somewhat further than the independent festival circuit: Gus van Sant directed several films exhibiting an introverted gaze, a slightness of plot, and a *vérité* commitment to the scene as vignette (*Gerry* (2002), *Elephant* (2003), *Last Days* (2005), and *Paranoid Park* (2007)).

Contemporary literature's closest analog to core minimalism has developed in a similar way to the 'mumblecore' film movement. A group of primarily young, mostly New York-based writers publishing work on small labels such as Brooklyn's Melville House Books, has produced a significant volume of work that adheres closely to Carver's syntax and diction. This fiction—sometimes adopting the label 'Kmart Realism': a derisive moniker formerly applied to the work of Carver, Ann Beattie, Frederick Barthelme et al—also displays a narrowness of scope and a preoccupation with concrete details and individual experience. The 2009 novella *Shoplifting from American Apparel* by Tao Lin serves as an excellent example. The text is divisible roughly into extended conversations between characters and flatly descriptive prose. The former is often repetitive, punctuated by changeless, serial attribution, and characterised by a lack of emotional variation and a tendency to switch between topics frequently and without obvious logic. In a very similar manner to Hemingway's reliance on simple, discrete sentences it falls to the reader to parse context. In many instances this effect is heightened by the fact of the conversations' taking place via email or instant messaging software. These mediums serve to strip emotional content so that the characters engaged in the conversation must report rather than display their feelings: '"I'm laughing"' (Lin 14); '"I felt emotional today thinking about the past"' (80).

This effect is often carried over to the conversations that happen in person, with both the characters and the narratorial voice simply reporting and retaining a studied distance from emotion:

> 'They talked about the salad's size and organic ingredients.
> "We can eat it together in the future sometimes," said Sam.
> "That would be good," said Sheila. "I would like that."' (23)

Lin's fiction, which exhibits the flat tone and constrained vocabulary of Carver's short stories even in the form of a 250 page novel (*Richard Yates* (2010) has been derided for its

simplicity, for its repetition, for the aloofness of its characters, and for a lack of conventional plot - all familiar complaints drawn by its adherence to the minimalist model.

To the extent that short fiction remains in the literary spotlight, in *The New Yorker* of course, and literary journals such as *Granta* and *McSweeney's*, it has increasingly followed the concerns and stylistic tendencies of the contemporary novel rather than being notable for a distinct mode of its own. Considering the close historical links between the two that we have observed it is reasonable to assess the relative decline of minimalism as attributable in part to the corresponding lesser prominence of the short story.

Where signs of life in minimalism do exist there are one or two names that commonly recur. Carver, of course, retains a presence by virtue of his recency—many of his near contemporaries (Beattie, Barthelme, Richard Ford, and Hempel amongst them) are still publishing, if with decreased frequency—even if his name is invoked as commonly as a pejorative as it is in praise. By virtue of his now relative vintage and established status and influence, Hemingway's name is more often reserved for flattering comparisons. In her review of Dave Eggers's latest novel Michiko Kakutani notes that the author, a frequent contributor to *The New Yorker* and the editor of *McSweeney's*, has developed a different style to that of his previous work:

> 'Mr. Eggers uses a new, pared down, Hemingwayesque voice to recount his story, a voice that stands in sharp contrast to the baroque, hyperventilated one he employed in his dazzling 2000 debut book, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. Gone are the self-conscious commentary and postmodern pyrotechnics of *Genius*. Gone too are the less effective exercises in mimicry and pastiche featured in his 2002 novel *You Shall Know Our Velocity*.'

It seems inevitable that at some point the pendulum of literary taste will swing back in the direction of minimalism once again, most probably finding it in some new permutation, employed to new ends by still familiar means.

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Conclusion: A Genealogy of Minimalism

It is little surprise that nearly a century past its emergence in popular literature the minimalist mode remains ill defined. Its seeming simplicity has proved deceptive in the resistance of one fixed model after another, such that to attach the label to the work of any one of its assumed proponents with any certainty is to exclude many of the others. Hemingway and Carver have both been hugely influential in American letters, but whilst one is certainly indebted to the other no assessment would hold them to be stylistically homogeneous. Similarly, the inheritance passed from Carver to Amy Hempel by way of Gordon Lish, and from Lish to Tom Spanbauer and on to Chuck Palahniuk is a shifting one.

Minimalism has proved mercurial, embodied in the work of each writer in an altered state, moulded to the concerns of their work. The romantic aspects of many of Hemingway's characters are gone in the downtrodden population of Carver's stories; Hempel is more carefully attuned to the emotional pitch of her scenes; Lin passes the language through a filter of benzodiazepine and digital distance.

Throughout all of these mutations however, and recalling that Hemingway's style itself was born of its own influences, we have seen the persistence of certain qualities: an economy of language, a reliance on inference, an understanding of the power of that which is absent from the work, and a reverence for the reader's ability to supply meaning, context, and depth beyond the contents of the page.

Regardless of its current outmoded status there remains an allure to the minimal, the kernel of which is any writer's belief in the power of language. Verbosity, eloquence and adornment are perhaps the more commonly practiced literary arts, but their opposite also holds an undeniable power. There is likely always to be some number of writers engaged in the project of distillation, simplification, and the writing of the truest sentence they know.

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