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Reconsidering Raymond Carver’s “Development”: The Revisions of “So Much Water So Close to Home”

Raymond Carver’s contribution to the American short story has been widely recognized, yet his literary image seems still somewhat stigmatized by the negative associations that have come to resonate with the category of “minimalism.” Indeed, during the turbulent debates of the eighties the term appears to have been ruined for literary criticism, as it was increasingly used to denigrate what was deemed second-rate workshop prose merely turning “less” into “a lot less” (Aldridge 45). As a result, critics intending to prove Carver’s literariness often feel compelled to preface their arguments with disclaimers, emphasizing that he is first and foremost an original storyteller and only tenuously related to the minimalist trend. There is a tendency in Carver criticism to reclaim him for a more traditionally realist poetics and argue that his minimalist leanings were merely part of a brief phase, too insignificant to be taken seriously. A. O. Scott’s New York Review of Books article “Looking for Raymond Carver” is an eloquent and representative example of this opinion.

1. The series of polemics around this literary trend, which now deserves to be called the “minimalism debate,” began with James Atlas’s reference to Raymond Carver’s “minimality” in 1981 (for a detailed assessment, see Sodowsky). Most of the so-designated authors have voiced their exasperation with the “m-word” (McCaffery), yet the aesthetic family resemblance between Carver and such authors as Amy Hempel and Jayne Anne Phillips, as well as The New Yorker-based Frederick Barthelme, Ann Beattie, and Bobbie Ann Mason, has been convincingly argued by a series of essays beginning with Kim Herzinger’s introduction to a Mississippi Review special issue on the topic (see also Simmons, “Minimalist Fiction”; Clark; and Hallett).
Scott identifies two opposing literary personae in Carver’s work, which he describes as “strikingly different in voice, manner, and attitude” (52): one he considers to be a genuine realist who excels in sympathetic accounts of America’s underprivileged; the other (represented by the 1981 collection of stories What We Talk About When We Talk About Love) he caricatures as a cynical minimalist who indulges in the very literary “tricks” he denounced in his interviews, producing a type of fiction that is “not an antidote to the antirealist, avant-garde impulse of the 1960s and 1970s, of writers like John Barth and Donald Barthelme, but rather its most extreme expression” (59). According to Scott, therefore, only the realist Carver represents “the real Carver,” while the other, we are told, was coerced into the minimalist fallacy by his unsympathetic editor:

It was on [What We Talk About] that the editorial hand of Gordon Lish fell most heavily, as Lish cut, rearranged, and rewrote freely, without regard for Carver’s wishes or feelings. According to Tess Gallagher [Carver’s widow], “Ray felt the book, even at the time of its publication, did not represent the main thrust of his writing, nor his true pulse and instinct in the work. He had, in fact, even begged Gordon Lish, to no avail, not to publish the book in this misbegotten version.”

(58)

It is questionable enough, I believe, to disqualify Carver’s most famous collection of stories with anecdotes about what Tess Gallagher deems his “true pulse”, yet the more crucial problem with Scott’s argument lies in the lack of conceptual precision that underlies his minimalism/realism opposition. Scott assumes falsely that the stability of Carver’s realism, and thus the value of his work, stands in inverse proportion to his reduction of materials. The more Lish induced Carver to pare down his stories, the argument goes,

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2. The discussion about the extent to which Lish imposed his will on Carver turned into a popular debate in the wake of D. T. Max’s New York Times article on Carver’s manuscripts. Although Max has demonstrated that the miniatures in What We Talk About, whose manuscript versions bristle with Lish’s cuts, might have looked different without Lish’s advice, I see but little use in the attempt to separate Carver from the type of influences to which authors tend to be exposed. At any rate, the quest for the “real” Carver behind Lish’s dominance resonates with an undertheorized, romantic notion of authorship that does not contribute much to our understanding of Carver’s versatile fiction.
the less meaningful they became. To be sure, this notion goes back to an earlier trend in Carver criticism (notably represented in Stull; Shute; Meyer, "Evolution"; Campbell; and Meyer, Carver), whose prominent "evolution theory" has remained unchallenged. It proceeds from the observation that Carver’s fiction developed from an earlier sense of menace to a later optimism (Stull; Chénetier), an argument that is tenable for some of his work but that becomes dubious if it slides into the notion that Carver’s frequent revisions of some of his most famous stories are to be seen as an artistic growth, not only from darker to brighter views on life, but from an early realism via a minimalist detour to a final stage of "mature" realism. To be sure, there is one isolated case where Carver moved toward a more realist poetics: when Carver reedited "The Bath" (What We Talk About) to produce "A Small, Good Thing" (Cathedral), he did indeed discard an oblique miniature in favor of a virtual novella based on a closely meshed network of causalities that leaves comparatively little unexplained. It is perhaps because of the popularity of the frequently anthologized "A Small, Good Thing" that critics have misconstrued it as emblematic for Carver’s overall development from minimalism toward a realist sensibility.

3. The realist sensibility is an abstraction that varies with the politics and poetics of the definer. For the purposes of this essay, I follow Malcolm Bradbury’s descriptive definition of American neorealism as a literary tradition that can be said to begin in the fifties (with, for instance, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, John Updike, and Gore Vidal) and to reemerge in the seventies and eighties (with Richard Ford, Alice Munro, Robert Stone, Amy Tan, Anne Tyler, Tom Wolfe, and many others). This tradition is complex and resists easy pigeonholing, but at the risk of simplification, it can be said to incline toward a kind of narrative closure that implies semantic depth and encourages us to engage in a hermeneutic reading aimed for a "deep knowledge" below the narrative surface. Narrative closure, of course, is an imprecise category whose shape depends on the assumptions of historic reader communities and their perceptions of a sense of hierarchy and order. For an illuminating catalogue of typical devices (such as plot coherency or causal-ity, accelerated semanticization, sustained thematic argument, an effective hierarchy of values, and the like), it is worth going back to Philippe Hamon’s classic, if somewhat sweeping, attempt at a definition and Christine Brooke-Rose’s critique thereof. Most of Carver’s work ultimately resists the type of narrative closure neorealists often prefer; the only exceptions, apart from "A Small, Good Thing," are "Fever," "Jerry, Molly, and Sam," "Careful," and, perhaps, "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?"
In what follows, I will propose an alternative interpretation of Carver’s editing and argue that the movement from the oblique toward narrative closure represented in his rewriting of “The Bath” into “A Small, Good Thing” has been overstressed by most adherents to the idea of Carver’s “growth” and is in fact the exception rather than the rule. My thesis is that although there are two types of Carver story, whose narrative surfaces clearly differ in scope, they cannot usefully be distinguished along the lines of a minimalism/realism opposition. Carver’s shifts between an expansive and a more contracted rhetoric hardly amount to a departure from the aesthetic premises that constitute the common ground of the minimalist movement. Instead, his revisions produced not stages in a development from minimalism to realism, but variants of one and the same literary sensibility, one that differs in kind from both contemporary neorealism and the experimentalist avant-garde.4

The defining aesthetic premise of this literary sensibility, as a number of critics have noted (Fluck; Clark; Herzinger, “Minimalism”; Simmons, “Minimalist”), is its intriguing appropriation of the representationalist rhetoric typical of American neorealism. The generic minimalist text toys with the reality-claims that we associate with representationalist narrative surfaces; its reportorial voice invites us into a familiar world based on ordinary experience seemingly so similar to everyday life that we feel comfortably at home in it and expect the semantic depth and sustained argument typical of the neorealist tradition; yet upon a closer look, the apparently smooth surfaces of minimalist fiction give way to a silence that surprises in the hyperreal fictional world the text describes. By juxtaposing representation with a lack of semantic depth, the minimalist text jumbles the rules of the traditional aesthetic games,

4. By “experimentalist” I mean texts whose narrative surface draws more attention to the problematics of storytelling than neorealist fiction generally does. This includes not only the metafiction and fabulism of the sixties ironists but also the less obviously subversive texts of a more experimental realism (for example, that of Walter Abish, Don DeLillo, Stephen Dixon, or Grace Paley) or other texts approximating the narrative logic of Alan Wilde’s “midfiction” (1987) or Linda Hutcheon’s “historiographic metafiction” (1988). There are only a few Carver stories that nod in the direction of self-reflexivity, such as “Blackbird Pie” and, to a lesser extent, “Intimacy” and “Whoever Was Using This Bed” from his final collection, Where I’m Calling From (1988). For a discussion of Carver’s rare exercises in self-reflexive irony, see Leypoldt (541).
disconnecting instability of meaning from metafiction, and representationalism from neorealism.\textsuperscript{5} The result is not, however, the radical breakdown of meaning that critics have seen in Carver’s shorter works (Lentricchia; Herzinger, “Minimalism”; Aldridge). In most of Carver’s minimalist stories, the resulting silence is a subtle quieting of voice that opens up the text’s referentiality without subverting it altogether, emerging more casually and unassumingly than in the modernist or postmodernist traditions.\textsuperscript{6}

Yet Carver’s intriguing combination of silence and reference is a structural aspect independent of the number of words on the page. Indeed, although it is tempting to see Carver as an heir to “Chekhov’s tone and temper” (Herzinger, “Introduction” 11) and the “clean and spare, now classic literary style of Ernest Hemingway” (Hallett 4), the attempt to explain his minimalist trademark with reference to his predilection for short sentences and miniature stories is tantamount to mistaking the tributary for the river.\textsuperscript{7} In some of Carver’s briefest and leanest of stories, such as those collected in \textit{What We Talk About}, he does not practice the Barthelmean anti-

\textsuperscript{5} In order to refine the differences between Carver’s minimalism and the neorealist tradition, it is useful to distinguish (following Frederick Barthelme) between “representationalism” and “neorealism.” Representationalism is the use of a rhetoric that appears “transparent” to its intended readers and induces them to focus on the story rather than the materiality of the text. It is a rhetoric, moreover, that “uses the mechanism of reality as a pattern source, a site from which building blocks are selected” (Barthelme and Robison i), evading what would strike its audience as fantastic or self-reflexive. While neorealists combine representationalist rhetoric with a sense of narrative closure, minimalists (and a variety of other literary schools since the \textit{nouveau roman}) do not.

\textsuperscript{6} It is the inconspicuousness and subtlety of Carver’s silence that marks his divergence from the “anti-style” practiced by most of the authors dealt with by Ihab Hassan in his \textit{Dismemberment of Orpheus} (such as Laurence Sterne or Thomas Pynchon), although Hassan’s description of Hemingway’s fiction as one in which silence can be said to be a result of a “transparent” language does highlight the parallels between Carver and Hemingway noted by many critics. I would agree with Winfried Fluck and Graham Clarke, however, that while Carver may occasionally prefer Hemingwayesque narrative surfaces, he tends to offer a lesser sense of symbolic unity (Clarke 110) and structural hierarchy (Fluck 73).

\textsuperscript{7} Most critics interested in minimalism’s renegotiation of neorealism have theorized the poetics of minimalism with an undue emphasis on verbal reticence, a deadpan tone, and brevity (following Herzinger, “Introduction”). The result is a narrowed definition, which excludes not only Carver’s more expansive stories, but also large parts of Frederick Barthelme’s. Ann Beattie’s, and Bobbie Ann Mason’s more long-winded work, which bristles with catalogues of trivia that in terms of narrative surface and form are anything but minimal, but which are still structurally related to minimalist poetics.
realist minimalism that Scott sees in him but compensates for the meaning that is lost through the reduction of material by means of a metaphorical "guardrail" that guides the reader's interpretive efforts. The defamiliarizing images with which Carver establishes this guardrail—images that are more subtle than the symbolist devices typical of modernist fiction, but that nonetheless "shine" through "the ordinariness of the talk" (Arias-Misson 628)—give the gist of the plot as eloquently as any literal commentary could, sustaining the referentiality of the text without leading it to complete closure. In Carver's more verbose stories, by contrast, he arrives at ambiguity through different stylistic means: though at first sight many of his expanded texts appear to provide a warm bath of readerly narrative, replete with representational material, they retain their minimalist quality, as final closure tends to be prevented by the subtle omission of relevant contexts on the basis of which the reader would be able to hierarchize the material and recognize a clear-cut plot. The result, then, is what John Barth has aptly called a "long-winded minimalism" (68), a relatively lengthy, seemingly referential text that does not ultimately lead to the neat buildup of meaning that the reader is led to expect.

Carver's revisioning of "So Much Water So Close to Home," I believe, is an illustrative case in point, both for Carver's stylistic variation and the fallacy of the notion of his "artistic growth." The two existing versions of this acclaimed story have received wide critical attention and were invariably used to sustain the "evolu-

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8. Thus, to take one of Carver's most famous examples, the dramatic potential in his "Why Don't You Dance?" is powerfully realized not by literal exposition or conceptual proposition but by the well-measured recharging of objects (such as household furnishings reassembled in a yard) with intimations of human emotions (such as betrayal and loss). This method is reminiscent of the historical schools of imagist poetry (for example, Ezra Pound's or T. E. Hulme's), but Carver differs from imagist poets, of course, in the amplitude of his imagery, as he evades their loud and sometimes eccentric tropes in favor of a more "teasing" symbolism (Saltzman 42). That is to say, his metaphors remain more hidden behind his lengthy representation of the quotidian, arriving with a more casual gesture than the typically modernist flourish. See Runyan for an elucidating study of how Carver's image patterns interconnect his stories.

9. Impressive examples of Carver's "long-winded minimalism" are "The Student's Wife," "What Do You Do in San Francisco?" "Vitamins," and most notably "What's in Alaska?" a lengthy real-time rendition of a dinner party whose neorealist appearance is mocked by its plotlessness and ambiguity.
tion” thesis (notably in Shute 8; Meyer, “Evolution” 243–46; Simmons, Deep Surfaces 115–17; and Scott 58). Thus the longer version has been misread as an example of Carver’s most mature realism, representative of his “natural form” (Meyer, “Evolution” 250), while the shorter one has been denounced as an instance of “his archminimalist phase” (250), falling short of accomplished storytelling. What I will argue, however, is that the stability of meaning in the longer version has been as much exaggerated as it has been underestimated in the shorter one. Both of the story’s variants, despite their stylistic differences, adhere to the aesthetic principles typical of the minimalist movement, oscillating between reference and silence, and thus locating themselves in between neorealism and experimentalism.11

10. There are in fact five published versions of the story. Carver first wrote a longer version that appeared in the Pushcart Prize anthology of 1976 and was included in his second collection of stories, Furious Seasons (1977). Subsequently, the material was rewritten into a miniature version, which Carver published in his reductionist collection What We Talk About (1981); eventually, he republished the longer version with minor changes in Fires (1984) and Where I’m Calling From (1989). For the purposes of my comparative analysis, I will speak of only two versions, one longer and the shorter one (which I will refer to as “Water” I and “Water” II). Carver’s four longer versions are virtually identical, differing in minor aspects that have to do with copy-editing: thus when Carver changed the Furious Seasons version for publication in Fires, he added or omitted a number of pronouns and replaced the odd word or half-sentence, without altering the text’s overall narrative and thematic structure; for the final publication in Where I’m Calling From he merely omitted the numbering of the story’s three segments.

11. When I argue that Carver’s minimalism locates itself “in between” silence and reference (or realism and antirealism), I do not mean to imply that the binary opposition is to be understood in rigid terms or as a simplistic “either/or.” Rather, silence and reference are to be seen as heuristic (rather than ontological) extremes of a differential scale of possibilities within which reader communities tend to locate the minimalist text. I do not think that the various attempts at transcending the binary with a tripartite structure (as proposed by Alan Wilde and Linda Hutcheon, replacing “realism/anti-realism” with “naive realism/self-reflexive realism/radical metafiction”) offer much conceptual cash value for theorizing Carver’s minimalism. To describe minimalism as “midfiction” or as a “low postmodernism” that is both referential and silent (as Simmons, “Minimalist Fiction,” has suggested, following Hutcheon’s model) implies a symmetrical in-betweenness that is no less rigid than the binary opposition. More importantly, perhaps, the description of Carver as a quasi postmodernist obscures that his texts are closer to neorealism than to its postmodernist subversion. Carver’s most intriguing minimalism, as I see it, is not a “low postmodernism” but a “minimal realism,” a realism with a subversive edge resulting from structural reduction rather than open irony.
In both versions of “So Much Water So Close to Home,” the plot centers around a married couple, Claire and Stuart, whose relationship becomes severely strained when Claire realizes how Stuart and his friends dealt with their discovery of a raped and murdered girl who was floating in the Naches River near where they had pitched their tents during a fishing excursion, several hours’ walk from civilization. After briefly discussing the situation, the men conclude that there is nothing to be done immediately, as the girl’s death is an unalterable fact and the car is about eleven miles away; they decide they might as well get on with their fishing and report their find on their way home the next day, rather than letting their excursion be spoiled. In order to prevent the dead girl from floating away, they tie her wrist to a tree. When Claire hears about the incident, she is stunned. The image of the men fishing and washing their dishes in the very same river in which the body is adrift horrifies her, and she is nauseated by the fact that she and Stuart were sexually intimate right after his return. One of the plot’s major twists is Claire’s identification with the raped girl; as she herself begins to feel virtually “victimized,” it becomes clear that her vehement reaction results from the fact that the incident at the Naches River causes a shock of recognition that yanks something painful out of her subconscious mind. Her horror, though triggered by her husband’s misbehavior, seems to be directed at whatever emerges in her mind as the symbolic referent of the events.

It is in the negotiation of this symbolic referent and deeper cause of Claire’s horror that the story’s two alternative versions differ considerably, and I will begin by considering the longer one (“Water” I). In accord with neorealist literary practice, Carver explores the rape theme with glimpses into Claire’s inner life, in the form of literal representations of her reflections. Quite typical of this procedure is the following interior monologue, which supports the reader’s suspicion that the repressed painful truth the Naches River incident causes to reemerge in Claire’s mind might be her unhappy marriage to a husband she deems emotionally cold. In Ann Beattie’s words, “what she perceives to be her husband’s cold imperviousness to the girl’s death epitomizes for her what is wrong with their own relationship” (181):
The past is unclear. It’s as if there is a film over those early years. . . . There was a girl [Claire, who refers to herself in the third person] who had a mother and father. . . . [She] becomes acquainted with one of the engineers who asks her for a date. Eventually, seeing that’s his aim, she lets him seduce her. She had an intuition at the time, an insight about the seduction that later, try as she might, she couldn’t recall. After a short while they decide to get married. . . . Once, during a particularly bad argument, over what she can’t now remember, five years or so after they were married, he tells her that someday this affair (his words: “this affair”) will end in violence. She remembers this. She files this away somewhere.

("Water" I 193)

Claire’s reflections suggest that she has always subconsciously felt dominated and abused by Stuart, from the moment of his first seduction to his invocation of their “affair’s” violent end, that is, its ending with her violation. The reader is led to believe, consequently, that she has repressed her fears (“she couldn’t recall” the seduction and “files away” the reference to violence) until the episode with the violated girl causes them to reemerge with a vengeance.

So far the text has led the reader along a generically neorealist trajectory, and this is indeed the point where most critics have concluded their analysis, having arrived at a clear-cut meaning and plot causality that fulfills the requirements of traditional notions of the accomplished story (in a similar way, perhaps, to Carver’s “A Small, Good Thing”). However, the story’s seemingly stable narrative framework is opened up with ambiguous sidetracks that merit closer attention. Instead of giving the established plot sharper contours, Carver lets Claire’s reflections wander quite erratically over a considerable range of dehierarchized impressions. Thus in another segment of her monologue, her fears shift from marital problems to a general frustration with human callousness (“Water” I 193), and the tone of her reflections acquires a Beckettian despair about the absurdity and vanity of the world. Carver, it seems, blurs the referent of Claire’s predicament by letting her ramble in incoherent monologues, with the result that her central issues and concerns “remain nebulous and unspoken” (Saltzman 87). Claire’s failure to gain a theoretical grasp of her problem hinders any clear causality from emerging. Indeed, the ambiguity of
Claire’s horror is heightened by the ineffectuality of her self-searching endeavors, with which she hopes to come to an understanding of the Naches River events and her own and her husband’s place in them. Carver dramatizes this failure in the form of an unsuccessful quest which drives Claire to attend the girl’s funeral, in order, as she points out, to find the “connection . . . of these things, these events . . . , if I can find it” (“Water” I 202). During her quest, her “head aches with the effort to find [the connection],” but eventually she returns empty-handed, with no more than unreflected and diffuse fears (203).

Claire fails to understand the reasons for her feeling of victimization, and so the reader is left to conjecture that her horror might result from her husband’s lack of empathy. However, Carver pulls the rug out from under this thesis with a device typical of minimalist fiction: he destabilizes the story’s causal network, not by literal commentary, but by blurring Claire’s narration with a note of unreliability. The result is not, of course, the easily recognizable kind of psychotic narration one knows from, say, Beckett or Faulkner, which leads to an immediate breakdown of credibility. Rather, Carver’s minimalist version of the unreliable narrator achieves its destabilizing effects precisely because its unreliability cannot be relied upon. By offering merely faint intimations that there may be a slightly neurotic or compulsive element involved, an occasional blurring of perspective, the text does not ironize the speaker completely but merely puts the story’s voice in invisible quotation marks, intimating that parts of the narration may be flawed without, however, stating exactly which ones. The upshot is a potential unreliability that effects a fluctuation between referentiality and self-reflexiveness.\(^\text{12}\) In Claire’s case, Carver interweaves her mono-

\(^{12}\) The difference between Carver’s “unreliable unreliability” and the various forms of irony with which (neo)realists tend to mark the bias of their narrators is a difference of degree, but nonetheless a significant one. As against Salinger’s Holden Caulfield, for instance, who confesses to being a compulsive liar, Claire’s unreliability is typically minimalist in that it is inconspicuous enough to be overlooked by the hurried reader, although the consequences to plot stability are more crucial than in Salinger’s case. Because Claire’s unreliability is so subtly marked, it might be mistaken for a Jamesian type of point of view, the highlighting of an involved narrator’s subjectivity; yet while the limited perspective of such narrators as Lambert Strether merely increases plot complexity, Claire’s unreliable unreliability opens up the story to incommensurable readings and
logues with hints at an obsessive and neurotic distortion of perception. The reader cannot be sure whether her entire story is objective, and if it is not, which parts are to be subjected to skeptical questioning. Consequently, one wonders whether her strong reaction is founded in the reality of Stuart's callousness, or whether her horror is imagined and thus self-reflexive rather than referential, which would expose her descriptions of the world as projections of her own nervous instability.

The jarring note in Claire's voice that prompts the reader's skeptical questioning of her reliability emerges in her reminiscences of the early days of her marriage. We learn that after the birth of their son, she suddenly developed a chronic headache, which, peculiarly, would begin every day at four o'clock. The doctor she consulted did not find any physiological causes, and the possibility that it had neurotic origins is implied by her decision to leave her family and go "for a while to a place the doctor recommend[ed]" ("Water" I 194). Though she omits the exact nature of the "place," it is likely to be the kind of institution that provides treatment for the nerves rather than for the body, where one is helped, for instance, to recover from a nervous breakdown. If one considers Claire's narration from this possible perspective, one can hardly help noticing an eerily obsessive tone in her recollections. After her departure, as she recalls somewhat resentfully, Stuart's mother moved into the house in order to look after the child. For reasons Claire does not mention, she could not accept her mother-in-law's reign, and so she left the "place" of her recuperation after a few weeks, in order to, as she puts it, "spoil everything" and reclaim her place in her family. Stuart's mother moved out of the house, but "[took] an apartment across town and perch[e]d] there, as if waiting" ("Water" I 194). The surreal image of Claire's mother-in-law "perched" as a bird of prey ready to strike could be merely flippant, but in the light of Claire's highly strung and obsessive tone of narration, one cannot help reading it as an allusion to the thus breaks down plot stability altogether. The discrepancy between the inconspicuousness of Claire's unreliability and its radical consequences to the coherency of the story's plot is typical of Carver's juxtaposition of representationalism with silence and epitomizes the subtlety with which he subverts the neorealist tradition.
topical kind of paranoid perception that tends to misconstrue the well-meant assistance of friends and family members as a “conspiracy” involving even the most trusted people. Though it is indeed a clichéd and simplified notion of paranoia, on account of the literary prominence of this theme it is difficult to ignore its echo in Claire’s rambling monologue. Consequently, one wonders whether the reality behind her vivid image does not rather consist in the more harmless fact that Stuart’s mother was staying close, on standby, as it were, to help in case Claire had a relapse and had to return to whatever “place” the doctor had sent her to once before.

If Claire’s visualization of the mother-in-law as a bird of prey is taken to signify her narration’s lapse from objectivity into unreliable projection—a slight loss of reality induced, perhaps, by an impending nervous breakdown—significant sections of the text suddenly seem to suggest that she faces a renewed disintegration of her nerves, such as her violent emotional roller-coaster rides (“I could laugh in his face. I could weep” [“Water” I 192]), her impulsiveness (she hits Stuart, then immediately regrets it; she sends the dishes to the floor, then sweeps them up again), her sleeplessness (“Water” I 197), as well as her almost physical signs of breakdown (“My head swims” [“Water” I 202]). Her conversation with her hairdresser, Millie, then, lends itself to being understood as marking the point when she finally loses her grip on reality, for not only does she lie to Millie by implying that she has some sort of relationship with the dead girl, but quite out of the blue she lapses into an eerie phantasm of self-annihilation: “That looks . . . fine. Millie, did you ever wish you were somebody else, or else just nobody, nothing, nothing at all?” (“Water” I 197). The wish to cease to exist, blurted out obsessively in the middle of a conversation about her haircut, could be read as signifying her intermittent retreat from the objective world into self-projection. Consequently, Claire’s subsequent roadside encounter with the traveler, whose presence makes her “grip the wheel until [her] fingers hurt” (“Water” I 200), could be interpreted as a sign that her sense-making is increasingly malfunctioning as her mind is turning in on itself, making her color the world with expressionist projections of her own paranoid sense of being violated. From this perspective, she
appears to have misconstrued as a rape attempt what in reality is the traveler’s honest intention to help a wild-eyed woman who has locked herself into her car in the midday heat, shouting: “I want to smother... I am smothering, can’t you see?” (“Water” I 201).

If one considers Claire’s narrative mode to be self-reflexive rather than referential, one begins to wonder about the extent to which her perception of Stuart’s behavior may be distorted, and whether he is not much more clumsy than cruel. Not knowing how to deal with his unstable wife other than to patronize her, and having experienced Claire’s first breakdown, he tries hard, one could argue, to limit the damage to his family, and he is torn between tenderness and anger about what to him seems her ungrounded declaration of war. When Claire suddenly hits him in the face, he stops her second attempt by grabbing her hand and raising his own as in a threat; but then he pulls himself together and censures her for being self-centered and focusing only on her own “goddamn self” (“Water” I 192)—which would not be an untypical reaction for a husband overwhelmed by his wife’s depressive instability, the reasons and mechanics of which he does not understand. The fact that he calls his mother at the very end of the story, finally, could be interpreted as revealing both his resignation and his attempt to help Claire in what has turned out to be a repetition of her first nervous breakdown. Indeed, Claire’s incoherent behavior during the story’s closing scene could be seen as further evidence of her neurotic disintegration: she lies in bed in the middle of the day, hangs up the phone on Stuart in midsentence, calls him again, hears only part of what he says, nods repetitiously, feels suddenly sleepy, then wide awake, and lapses into a compulsive repetition of the rape theme (“Water” I 204).

In case my reading of Claire as unstable might give the impression that it misconstrues the depiction of a woman’s genuine suffering as a mere “hysterical” fantasy, let me hasten to add that the strength of Carver’s text, and its minimalist trademark, is precisely that it only suggests, but never conclusively supports, the thesis of Claire’s unreliability. In fact, if the text is viewed from a perspective more sympathetic to Claire, one could argue that her nervous breakdown may be a thing of the past—neither grave enough to
have led her to a paranoid perception of things, nor recurring at the present time. Thus her contradictory and impulsive words and gestures could just as easily be interpreted as signifying the emotionalized outrage of a generally stable, if unsettled, woman, who has been driven close to the edge by her insensitive husband and her domineering and jealous (that is, predatory) mother-in-law. Her lies to the hairdresser could be a sign of embarrassment rather than a loss of reality, her fears of the traveler could stem from her astute perception of the man’s lewd intentions rather than from an expressionist projection. Her incoherence during the phone call with Stuart, finally, could be taken to signify the exhausted exasperation of an emotionally intelligent woman who tells her sheepish and noncomprehending husband that nothing matters anymore because she has stopped caring about her marriage.

Teasing out this kind of baffling ambiguity in Carver’s text does not presuppose the haphazard blurring of the distinctions between central and marginal meaning that one associates with misunderstood deconstructionism. Rather, it was Carver who opened up the text by stripping it of the information that the reader would need to determine the extent of Claire’s reliability and choose between two possible readings. Consequently, Claire’s character resembles the optical illusions in multilayered picture prints or holograms, whose various shapes seem to emerge and disappear depending on the angle from which one looks at them. Carver achieves this ambiguity by dehierarchizing rather than by merely reducing the story’s material. He arrives at a “long-winded minimalism” by means of a narratorial camera eye that records a great deal of information about Claire’s inner life yet omits precisely those facts necessary to validate conclusively whether her vision of the world is referential or self-reflexive. More specifically, Carver omits Claire’s gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice, so that the text’s dialogues and interior monologues resemble the written protocols of a courtroom scribe, who jots down every word that is spoken but excludes any information about the manner in which it is said. By this minimalist strategy, the “true” character of Claire remains undecidable, leaving the plot inconclusive, which is a dilemma from the viewpoint of the neo-realist tradition, a tradition that tends to be at odds, of course, with the notion of epistemological
undecidability. The longer version of “So Much Water,” then, is not an exercise in traditional storytelling on the basis of which one can convincingly argue for any “growth” toward realism, nor, of course, for a relapse into antirealist experiment. On the contrary, the story’s minimalist signature consists in the fact that its ambiguity is more subtle than that of more conventional experimental fiction, as the narrator’s unreliability is never established with certainty.

The revised, shorter version of the story (“Water” II) achieves its minimalist outlook through different means, replacing the literal, metonymic accounts of the longer version with a series of images, so that the text gains in metaphorical richness what is lost in conceptual statement. Yet on the level of the story, the changes on the narrative surface have considerable effect. Most of the extended representations of Claire’s inner life have fallen victim to Carver’s editing, and with the omission of both Claire’s first nervous breakdown and the memories of her early marriage, she is completely stripped of her history. Since her rambling monologues have disappeared, her narration is now devoid of any obsessively neurotic tone, with the result that the scale of her horror does not seem quite as dramatic anymore. There is a strong sense that she is unsettled by the events, but the reader has no reason to believe that she might be on the brink of disintegration, nor is there any evidence that she ever was. The crucial difference between the two Claires is that Claire the shorter does not give any literal hints as to the referent of her “horror.” There are phrases and gestures that could be taken as subtle metaphorical intimations that her unease stems from Stu-

13. I do not intend to participate in the polemics against realism that reemerged in the eighties and argue (with Catherine Belsey, for example) that the generic neorealist text is necessarily schematic and ideologically dubious. My point is merely that neorealist fiction, though it might include many conflicting and contradictory voices approaching a Bakhtinian heteroglossia, will tend to strive toward a hierarchization of voices and effective values, encouraging the reader to an ordering of the fictional universe. By the end of a neorealist text, credibilities will have been discredited, and the characters will have been hierarchized along the lines of the “realistic-ness” of their world views. Carver’s opening up of Claire’s and Stuart’s characterization marks his divergence from the neorealist tradition.
art’s emotional coldness. There is also a more global sense of unease with regard to men in general, whom she seems to perceive as misconstruing human relations and communication as a mere using and abusing of people. Yet all of these notions remain at the level of metaphorical reverberations, which give the text a certain richness of meaning but nothing resembling a stable causality.14

Now, the critical discontent with Carver’s shorter version is based on the idea that Carver’s contraction of the story effects a diminishment of meaning. Adam Meyer, for instance, argues that the “elimination” of Claire’s history has devastating effects, leaving “us unsure of the real motivations of the characters, thus diminishing our understanding of what is really going on” (“Evolution” 243). According to Meyer, therefore, the rambling and incoherent monologues of Claire the longer provide an “understanding of the main characters” as well as “the actions within the story.” To be sure, the notion that the longer version offers a “fuller and more clear” “exposition” about “what has taken place” (Simmons, Deep Surfaces 116) and thus helps us to “grasp what is going on in the story” (Meyer, “Evolution” 242) posits a univocality of plot and character that the longer version of the text does not achieve, unless one entirely ignores Carver’s subversions of Claire’s credibility and reads the story as if it were traditionally neorealist.

At another level, moreover, the evolution theory also seems based on an underestimation of the richness of meaning that Carver generates in the shorter version, a richness garnered through the intricacy and complexity of the story’s metaphorical guardrail. The evolution theorists’ imperceptiveness to Carver’s imagery becomes particularly conspicuous in the way they deal with his modification of the story’s ending. In the longer version, the rape theme culminates in a clash between Claire and Stuart,

14. As a result, readers assuming with Ann Beattie that the Naches River events make Claire epiphanically grasp the problems of the marriage (181) will not find in the shorter version a single literal reference that would conclusively support this thesis, particularly as the longer version’s historical flashbacks have been taken out. As these omissions heighten the story’s ambiguity, Carver seems to have deemed it unnecessary to further destabilize the plot and question Claire’s reliability as much as he does in the longer version.
where she aggressively resists his attempt to show his empathy with sexual comforts:

[He says] “I think I know what you need, honey. Let me play doctor, okay? Just take it easy now.” He reaches an arm around my waist and with his other hand begins to unbutton my jacket, then my blouse. “First things first,” he says, trying to joke.

“Not now, please,” I say.

“Not now, please,” he says, teasing. “Please nothing.” Then he steps behind me and locks an arm around my waist. One of his hands slips under my brassiere.

“Stop, stop, stop,” I say. I stamp on his toes.

("Water" I 203)

Carver’s contracted, imagist version, by contrast, negotiates the theme quite differently, with Claire immediately accepting Stuart’s sexual offer:

He says, “I think I know what you need.”

He reaches an arm around my waist and with his other hand he begins to unbutton my jacket and then he goes on to the buttons of my blouse.

“First things first,” he says.

He says something else. But I don’t need to listen. I can’t hear a thing with so much water going.


("Water" II 87–88)

The subtlety and obliqueness with which Carver reintroduces the rape theme in the shorter version is striking: rather than having Claire reflect on her sense of being violated, he lets her be puzzled by the imaginary sound of water, which establishes a metaphorical connection with the girl’s rape and murder. As Alain Arias-Misson astutely points out: “This metaphor is achieved with so deft a touch that at first it slips by unnoticed. Its intensity is so alien to the ordinary flow of the voice—stripped of metaphor or image—that the reader checks back to see if the faucet has been left running in the kitchen. A metaphorical identity has been astonishingly realized” (628). So astonishingly, indeed, that several critics apparently found it too faint to be significant and ignored its allusions to the
rape. Arthur Saltzman even argues that for Claire the "sound of water is a welcome oblivion, a shrinking from insight," and thus he concludes that Claire’s lovemaking signifies an escapist "re-prieve from consciousness" (90). Kathleen Shute, similarly, has suggested that Claire "spins her own web of denial, seeking to obliterate the entire moral dilemma with a loveless and hurried act of sex," a kind of sexual escapism, therefore, which Shute takes as evidence for the shorter version’s lack of "emotional and imaginative capacity" (8). At any rate, most evolution theorists recognize that the image might be an allusion to Claire’s voluntary submission to a symbolic rape but argue that such a turn of the plot "is rather illogical and unconvincingly forced," because Claire’s motivations are left "unclear" (Meyer, "Evolution" 245) and "nothing in the story prepares us for this reversal in [Claire’s] attitude toward her husband" (Simmons, Deep Surfaces 117). As a result, they take Carver’s revision to lead to a "botched ending" (Simmons 116) and to be quite emblematic for the diminishment of meaning that follows whenever Carver dabbles in minimalist reductionism.

The most obvious problem with the claims of absent plot logic and coherency of character is that they are based exclusively on the plot and characterization of the longer version. Thus the actions of Claire the shorter are deemed out of character (Simmons, Deep Surfaces 117) on the basis of Carver’s portrayal of Claire the longer. In fact, it would have been advisable to listen to Carver as he pointed out that his revisions led to "different stories . . . to be judged differently" ("Matters" 187), and that consequently there is no such thing as one, single logic of plot or character that could be said to stretch over both stories. The difference, then, between the two Claires is glaringly obvious: Claire the longer, at the end of her tether, if not close to a nervous breakdown, has been making clear to her husband right from the beginning of the story that she does not wish to be touched. Stuart’s insensitive attempt to "comfort" her with sexual intimacy, moreover, comes at the very moment when her nervous instability has reached a peak, after her return from the girl’s funeral. Her resistance, therefore, seems indeed self-evident and in keeping with plot logic. Claire the shorter, on the contrary, has never been characterized as being similarly close to the edge. Instead, she is uneasy and uncomfortable in a
repressed, almost subconscious way, with the result that her hostil-
ity to Stuart is of a more automatic and unreflected kind and leads
to a more concealed and passive resistance. In the light of Claire’s
passivity, to be sure, the plot logic of the longer story does not
apply, and thus while the reasons for her acceptance of Stuart’s
advances may be unclear, they cannot be equated with an illogical
“reversal” of attitude (Simmons, *Deep Surfaces* 117).

It seems likely that the revised ending has baffled the advocates
of Carver’s “evolution” primarily because they have failed to see
the complexity of the metaphorical undercurrents that the water
image emits. Meyer’s conclusion that we do not understand
Claire’s behavior reveals a reading posture suited to more ortho-
dox realisms, from the vantage point of which “understanding”
necessitates literal and unshakable pieces of evidence, which nei-
ther of the versions of Carver’s text provide. However, if one di-
 rects only the slightest attention to Carver’s imagery, one can
hardly miss the most gloomy metaphorical guardrail established
by the water image, which guides the reader to an intrinsically
tragic plot: according to this layer of meaning, Claire has returned
from the funeral not at her wit’s end (as is Claire the longer), but
anxious to save her marriage, to “restore her commitment to life”
(Saltzman 90), or simply to end the hostilities and achieve some
kind of normality. The tragic punch line, then, consists in the fact
that she experiences Stuart’s seduction as a rape (and feels over-
whelmed by water), but in spite of her feelings, because of her wish
to resolve the crisis, persists in her conciliatory gesture, accepting
and even participating in her own violation. The claim that such
a self-sacrifice would be illogical (Simmons, *Deep Surfaces* 117;
Meyer, “Evolution” 245) sits uncomfortably with the numerous lit-
ery role models for Claire’s predicament, most notably Sue Bride-
head, the heroine of Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (1895). Har-
dy’s naturalist novel about Victorian sexual morality exasperated
his contemporaries for reasons that would seem tame today, but
the key conceit of its plot has retained, I believe, its shock effect:
it concerns the scene where Sue submits to a husband whom she
does not love, and whose physical presence sickens her. Though
her husband had been aware of Sue’s repulsion and had accepted,
if somewhat grudgingly, to leave the marriage unconsummated,
Sue actively encourages her violation out of feelings of guilt mixed with a warped sense of marital duties. Hardy is less subtle, of course, than Carver in his evocation of the rape thematics. He takes several pages to describe Sue’s abhorrence at the thought of being touched by her husband, and her reaction to being carried over the bedroom’s threshold and kissed is as eloquent of her martyrdom as Victorian literary decorum allows: “A quick look of aversion passed over her face, but clenching her teeth she uttered no cry” (313).

The difference in Carver’s negotiation of Hardy’s theme is that the evidence for Claire’s self-sacrifice remains fleetingly metaphorical. The reader does not know for sure whether Claire is a latter-day Sue Bridehead, clenching her teeth in a silent crying of “the horror,” or whether she merely feels subliminal unease. Thus, while in Hardy’s novel female self-sacrifice is an unmistakable fact and a major impulse behind the plot’s tragic closure, in Carver’s story it is no more than a possibility, a single note within the intricate harmonics reverberating with the water image. The subtlety of the theme, to be sure, prevents the heavy pathos inherent in Hardy’s novel, whose fully realized concept of martyrdom would grate rudely with contemporary ideas about marital sex. Furthermore, Carver’s thematic restraint should have prevented such one-sided interpretations as Simmons’s, who declares Claire’s submission to be a “puzzlingly abject gesture of surrender and self-annihilation” (Deep Surfaces 117), a verdict, of course, that may be suitable to Sue Bridehead’s predicament but that is decidedly too melodramatic for Claire’s.

What is typical of Carver’s contracted version, moreover, is that though the text’s imagery suggests possible meanings, it never presses them toward univocality. It is not by accident, I think, that Carver chose to omit from the text any description of Claire’s attitude on the brink of her symbolic rape—such as her tone of voice, her posture, her facial expression. By remaining silent about Claire’s feelings, he has opened up the story’s ending to overtones of sexual desire, resonating with Claire’s encouraging gestures (as she helps Stuart to open her blouse and says to him, “That’s right,” “Hurry”). Consequently, alongside the notion that Claire’s encouragements may be motivated by her eagerness to “get it over with”
as quickly and painlessly as possible—what to her is at best a "loveless and hurried act of sex" (Shute 8) and at worst a miserable ordeal—there emerges another possible reading, which interprets her active participation as being driven by a genuine sexual arousal in the face of being pressed into surrender and self-abandonment.

If this reading seems implausible, it is again borne out by a tradition of literary role models, primarily within the American crime novel, with which Carver was well familiar. I am not, of course, referring to such female caricatures as Faulkner’s grotesque antiheroine Temple Drake, the sexual masochist of Sanctuary (1931) and Requiem for a Nun (1950), who falls “in lust” with one of her violators during what Faulkner terms a “rape become tender” (Requiem 170). Rather, Claire’s and Stuart’s behavior recalls the protagonists of James M. Cain’s classic The Postman Always Rings Twice (1934), Cora Papadakis and her lover Frank Chambers, who are both susceptible to the potential eroticism not of actual rape, of course, but of more playful games based on the nexus of sex and physical force.15 The structural parallels between Cain’s and Carver’s texts are salient: both Cora’s and Claire’s fantasies seem to be obsessively driven by the fact that their seducers have in some way been involved with actual violence and murder, which heightens the exquisite horror of their symbolic “ravishments.” In Cain’s text, the lovers’ passion is consequently described as “love” with “fear in it” (108), and Cora’s erotic fear is increased when she lies awake in bed imagining “a way [Frank] could kill me” (110) and concludes that he could do it best by drowning her. Claire’s emphatic identification with the dead girl floating in the Naches River, similarly, could very well be interpreted as being motivated by a comparably erotic element, and consequently, Claire’s pilgrimage

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15. The most climactic negotiation of this theme in Cain’s novel occurs in the scene in which Frank manhandles Cora in order to convince the police that she was in the car accident they have faked to conceal a murder. Frank starts to dishevel her hair and to burst the buttons of her blouse, and as she encourages him to be more rough with her clothes (“Rip me! Rip me!”), he tears open her blouse and eventually hits her in the face in order to give her an alibi bruise. This final increase of pitch in their staged fight heightens Cora’s excitement to the point that she is gasping for breath, further spurring him on (“Yes! Yes, Frank, yes!”), until both of them land on the floor, “staring in each other’s eyes, and locked in each other’s arms, and straining to get closer” (46).
to the girl’s funeral acquires undertones of sexual obsession no less dark and unsettling than Cora’s.

The difference between Carver’s and Cain’s negotiation of the theme is the degree of closure. Carver’s hints toward Claire’s erotic enjoyment of Stuart’s advances are no more dominant a tone in the open harmonics of his imagery than the notion of her painful self-sacrifice. Again, the text’s ambiguity corresponds to Carver’s literary sensibility: in accord with the poetics of minimalism, Claire’s symbolic rape resonates with both Sue Bridehead’s and Cora Papadakis’s situations, letting the text fluctuate in rich metaphorical undercurrents below the representations of the quotidian, without however pressing either of them toward a conclusion. As a result, the revised ending prevents semantic univocality as much as it provides a certain referentiality.

My study of Carver’s reediting of “So Much Water So Close to Home” suggests that though his (re)expansions result in variations in rhetorical register, they cannot be used to demonstrate his gradual departure from the poetics of minimalism in favor of a more realist sensibility. This critical point, which applies equally to the remainder of Carver’s revisions (“A Small, Good Thing,” of course, excepted), addresses issues that go beyond the mere question of how exactly Carver has altered some of his most famous stories in the course of his career. What is at stake, rather, is the pertinence of the rigid minimalism/realism opposition that now dominates Carver criticism. Critics arguing on the basis of this opposition too readily reduce Carver’s leaner versions of minimalist poetics to a stylistic caprice that surrenders the “philosophical quest into meaning” (Shute 1) along with moral concerns, offering merely “silence” and “absence” (Clarke 100) and a bleak and existentialist vision of humanity (Stull 7). At the same time, they reduce Carver’s more verbose stories (his long-winded minimalism) to exercises in social commentary, whose strength they take to lie in the author’s authenticity, his “honesty,” and even his “decency” (Scott 52). At some level, the notion that stylistic experimentation inevitably goes hand in hand with solipsism and epistemological and moral blankness (that is, with the opposite of “authenticity” and “decency”) is a
remnant of an early stage of the debates around the postmodern, and, ironically enough, the various defenses of the aesthetics of minimalism as a continuation of “the voracious postmodern sensibility” (Herzinger, “Minimalism” 76) have unintentionally helped to underpin the stereotyping of Carver’s work, namely by staging his defense on the basis of concepts derived from an older literary paradigm. Yet Carver’s fiction, if his achievement is to be evaluated adequately, needs to be placed in its immediate aesthetic context, from which point metafictional irony is not per se perceived as subversive (due to its increasing conventionality and exhaustion), and in which representation does not necessarily entail simple reference. Carver’s most intriguing texts are defined by the specific stylistic premises of this aesthetic context, and his minimalist version of the unreliable narrator is a prime example: it locates the text on the thin (and historically variable) line between experimental ambiguity and referential commentary. It is Carver’s specific balancing on this thin line, his oscillation between meaning and absence behind a representationalist mask (rather than his occasional verbal reticence and deadpan presentation) that accounts for his family resemblance with the more rigorous representatives of the minimalist literary movement.

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