Raymond Carver’s “Epiphanic Moments”

Criticism on Raymond Carver is marked by an astonishing absence of consensus. Indeed, like no other author of the so-called minimalist movement, Carver has been coopted by the various critical schools as a conveniently elastic foil to demonstrate their respective aesthetic ends. Thus critics interested in literature’s heteronomous aspects have interpreted Carver as (1) a genuine social realist who excels in sympathetic accounts of America’s underprivileged (e.g., Morris Dickstein), (2) a dangerous social realist with a conservative political agenda (e.g., Frank Lentricchia), or (3) a failed social realist with no political agenda and no understanding of his social matrix whatsoever (e.g., John Aldridge).

Critics focused on literature’s epistemological commentary have described him as (1) a naive naturalist behind a minimalist mask, betraying the achievements of the 1960s ironists (e.g., William H. Gass), (2) an epistemological nihilist behind a realist mask, sharing the postmodernist refusal to engage with reality (e.g., Tom Wolfe, “Stalking”), or (3) a genuine postmodernist skepticist who synthesizes the one-sided epistemologies of conventional realists and traditional fabulists into a higher level (e.g., Phillip Simmons).

Critics looking for literature’s aesthetic function and formal innovation, finally, have read Carver as (1) a founder of a new, highly original, representationalist version of the minimalist style (e.g., John Barth, “A Few Words”), (2) a copier of an insipid, Hemingwaysque tone more suitable to popular fiction (e.g., Joshua Gilder), or (3) a stylistically blank chronicler of urban despair with virtually no literary signature at all (e.g., James Atlas).

To an extent, this unusual heterogeneity of critical assessments may result from a lack of historical distance; yet at some level, I believe, it was encouraged by the structural specifics of Carver’s work: Carver’s typical text offers hardly any obvious hints as to its aesthetics, epistemology, or politics. In terms of the sort of questions critics have begun to ask in the wake of the debates on realism and postmodernism since the 1960s, Carver’s stories can be said to be “open” texts. This does not mean, of course, that they transcend aesthetic questions or leave them entirely up to the reader; it does mean, however, that they eschew the clear aesthetic markers with which hurried readers can easily determine what kind of text they are dealing with (i.e., pre-, post-, post-post-modernist, and the like) and thus what kind of reading posture they should adopt (i.e., suited for ironic play or serious social
commentary). Carver, it seems, jumbles the rules of the traditional aesthetic games by juxtaposing representation with silence and disconnecting experiment from metafiction, but he does not complement his texts with convenient metacommentaries, either implicit or explicit, that guide the reader towards a clear-cut textual intention. What further complicates assessment of Carver’s work, moreover, is that the notion of the Carver-text really applies only to his blue-collar subject matter and the general feel of his narrative surfaces. That is to say, although one can speak of a characteristic “tone” and “theme” of Carver’s fiction, there is, behind the exterior of his type of minimalist, *New Yorker* story, a rhetorical versatility and a constant shifting of rhetorical register that eludes simplistic categorization. Most of the stylistic catalogues conceived as an attempt at defining “minimalist technique” (by, for instance, Bell or Herzinger) fail to do justice to a diversity in Carver’s prose that often goes unnoticed because its stylistic stoppings and subversions do not always come with the histrionic sashay typical of experimentalist fiction. Carver’s verbal subtlety and outward technical reticence seem to have encouraged his interpreters to beat his work into whatever aesthetic or political intention suits their purpose.

In what follows, I will focus on a specific aspect of Carver’s rhetoric that is often used to stereotype the aesthetic signature of his work, namely his employment of epiphanic rhetoric. Several commentators have argued that the Carver-story generally fails to culminate in a moment of “climactic insight into a truth about the human condition,” a “large revelation or crescendo of meaning” (Aldridge 30, 31), or, in Joycean terms, an “epiphany” (Davis 653). Others have answered this charge by insisting that there are indeed moments of “recognition and insight” (Clarke 111) in Carver’s fiction, that his characters “for the most part do indeed learn and grow, albeit in a muted, implicit way” (Meyer, *Raymond Carver* 24), and that his use of epiphany resembles Joyce’s in the sense that the text provides an “insight” that causes “the reader or character to see matters in a new light” (Campbell 4). Others again have said that the “the absence of epiphany” in Carver is precisely his strength and reflects a postmodernist sensibility: by moving “beyond” epiphany, Carver expresses a Lyotardian “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Clark 391). Yet although none of these verdicts is entirely unfounded, they tend to obscure that how Carver employs the epiphanic moment in varied functional frameworks makes its narrative effects more complex and diverse than they appear at first sight. What I will argue, therefore, is that behind the similarities in surface rhetoric of Carver’s (anti-) epiphanic moments, there is an intriguing multi-facetedness both in terms of their functional location and of their effects on the text’s narrative structure.

1. Carver and the Realist Epiphany

Carver’s interest in the rhetoric of the sudden illumination is well-known. In his autobiographical sketch “On Writing,” he emphasized his indebtedness to a line
from a story by Chekhov he reportedly liked so much that he pinned it on the wall beside his writing desk: it reads, “. . . and suddenly everything became clear to him.” Carver was intrigued, he said, by the “hint of revelation that’s implied” (Fires 23). If the notion of a “hint of revelation” is understood in the romanticist or modernist terms on which recent aesthetics (Beja, Langbaum, Nichols), phenomenologies (Bidney, Patterns), and typologies (Tigges) of literary epiphany tend to focus, it refers to the charging of external reality with a sense of transcendental significance that, on the one hand, makes a text’s narrative agent see matters in a radically new light, but that, on the other, cannot be translated into a logical proposition or concept. This “revelation,” then, remains at the level of a non-semantic sense of the “whatness of things” and at best branches into multiple meanings. Thus Morris Beja, in his landmark study Epiphany in the Modern Novel, cautions that the epiphanic moment should not be confused with the “classical sense of recognition, or anagnorisis,” in which discoveries tend to be “rational” rather than “spiritual” (15-16). Yet both Carver’s and Chekhov’s use of epiphanic rhetoric is related, however tenuously, to a literary paradigm of nineteenth-century realism that differs from romantic or modernist paradigms in that it frequently allows the “sudden illumination” to converge with rational recognition, so that the differences between epiphany and anagnorisis indeed become blurred, with the one potentially entailing or at least implying the other. That is to say, realist texts often employ the character’s revelatory experience to achieve a more world-oriented than metaphysical reference, with the result that the Wordsworthian “moment”—where one suddenly sees or feels a spiritual truth that resists reason—slides into a more positivist sense of revelation—where one also suddenly understands the mechanics of a complex external world. As a result, in the realist poetics the “hints of revelation” that the protagonist experiences may not only arrive with a spiritual aura, but also lead to a gaining of self-awareness that can be put into words, and that can therefore be presented to the reader as a certified window on reality revealing a more or less tangible “truth” behind the “appearances.” The sudden illumination, then, becomes a seminal narrative device with which not only to structure plot but also to provide it with a narrative climax (marked by the pathos of sudden illumination) and a logical resolution.

Perhaps the paradigmatic example of the blurring of the distinction between epiphany and anagnorisis is Tolstoy’s “The Death of Ivan Ilych” (1886), one of the most influential texts of classic realism. It tells the story of a spiritually empty law-court official, who in the face of his approaching death suddenly realizes, in a vivid flash of perception, that his outwardly successful life was in reality defined by shallow conventions and a hypocritical morality. His shock of recognition is prompted by a logically insignificant observation revolving around the demeanor and appearance of his wife:

His wife came in to congratulate him after his communion, and when uttering the usual conventional words she added: “You feel better, don’t you?” Without looking at her he
said “Yes.” Her dress, her figure, the expression of her face, the tone of her voice, all revealed the same thing. “This is wrong, it is not as it should be. All you have lived for and still live for is falsehood and deception, hiding life and death from you.” And as soon as he admitted that thought, his hatred and his agonizing physical suffering again sprang up, and with that suffering a consciousness of the unavoidable, approaching end. (sec. XI)

Within the narrative framework of Tolstoy’s story, Ilyich’s moment of insight, described with the generic markers of spiritual illumination, functions as the capstone of a linear bildungsroman pattern, a teleological development during which the hero overcomes his initial ignorance and arrives at a point where he can glimpse the reality behind the surfaces of his existence. What constitutes Tolstoy’s typically realist narrative strategy is the fact that the reader’s sense-making is pulled along with the character’s recognition: Ilyich’s sudden “revelation” converges with the implied author’s viewpoint of things and is presented to the reader as the story’s important “insight.” This narrative pattern has often been ironized by modernist and postmodernist writers and lambasted by critics for epitomizing the epistemological naivety of realism (see Saltzman, “Epiphany”), but within the American literary tradition, in which various forms of realism have always prevailed, it has remained prominent. Indeed, in the neorealist novels that appeared in the 1980s alongside Carver’s work, it is a rather common narrative pattern, one of the more obvious and widely-read examples being Tom Wolfe’s Bonfire of the Vanities (1987). This city-novel’s main protagonist, Sherman McCoy, resembles a tragicomical yuppie version of Ilyich, developing from a stage of ignorance towards a stage in which, as the narrator puts it, he can see the world with “the eyes of a realist”(593). McCoy’s bildungsroman development is triggered by his financial and social undoing rather than by a fatal disease, and his “death” at the end of the novel is a metaphorical one, symbolic of the demise of McCoy’s yuppie-persona and of his spiritual rebirth. Yet his epiphanic awakening, in which he recognizes the shallowness of his glamorous world, is told without irony and very much a transferal of Tolstoy’s narrative pattern to Wolfe’s New Journalist-type of diction:

Never in [McCoy’s] life had he seen things, the things of everyday life, more clearly [ . . . ]—oh God!—he now noticed the smallest things . . . the egg-and-dart molding around the cornice on the main floor . . . the old bronze shades on the lamps on the check-writing desks in the middle of the lobby . . . the spiral fluting on the posts supporting the railing between the lobby and the section where the officers sat . . . All so solid! so precise! so orderly! . . . and now so specious! such a mockery! . . . so worthless, offering no protection at all. (427)

Carver’s work includes a few isolated stories in which the epiphany equals recognition and leads to the solid plot closure of classic or neorealism, particularly those stories such as “A Small, Good Thing” or “Jerry, Molly, and Sam” that tend to be favored by a school of critics arguing for Carver’s “development” towards realism. Perhaps the most thorough example of Carver’s flirtation with orthodox realism occurs in “Fever,” a story about a man’s painful coming to terms with
having been left by his wife. After the protagonist has spent several pages drifting 
and suffering from his loss, unsuccessfully trying to regain his moorings and 
secretly hoping that his marriage can be restored, a friendly gesture from his 
housekeeper causes a cathartic shock of recognition in which he realizes that he 
must face the reality of his wife’s departure and make a new start:

It was then, as he stood at the window [and saw his maid waving at him], that he felt 
something come to an end. It had to do with Eileen [i.e., his ex-wife] and the life before 
this. Had he ever waved at her? He must have, of course, he knew he had, yet he could not 
remember just now. But he understood it was over, and he felt able to let her go. He was 
sure their life together [. . .] was something that had passed. And that passing—though it 
had seemed impossible and he’d fought against it—would become a part of him now, too, 
as surely as anything else he’d left behind. (Cathedral 186)

In this case-study of realist epiphany, because the sudden illumination stems 
from the observation of a gesture logically unrelated to the experience it causes, it 
therefore seems out of proportion, very much in line with current definitions of the 
literary epiphany. Yet, at the same time, the defamiliarizing quality of the 
epiphanic vision leads to a “truth” that is spelled out, that makes the protagonist’s self-awareness tangible, and that thus finally guides readers to a plot they can probe 
for its implicit “deep knowledge.”

2. Carver’s “Arrested” Epiphany

Most of Carver’s work, however, evades this unrefracted type of resolution 
and instead features a variation that I would like to call an “arrested epiphany.” The 
arrested epiphany still functions as a focal point within the narrative’s progression, 
but at the same time it is defined by a distinct disparity between the character’s 
feeling of revelation and his or her lack of understanding of what sort of insight the 
revelation is supposed to provide. That is to say, the centers of consciousness 
realize, with an often disquieting sense of menace, that there is something out of 
joint in their world, that at some level they are on the brink of making a tremendous 
discovery, but they remain far from grasping what exactly it could be. The 
structural significance of Carver’s arrested epiphany depends on its functional 
location within a story’s narrative framework. In Carver’s most experimental 
work, which can be said to be a quasi-representationalist variant of a pronounced 
anti-realism, the protagonist’s epiphanic vision emerges as a sudden climax at a 
point when the reader expects the loose narrative threads to be synthesized into at 
least partial closure; yet it typically remains an anti-climax, for it leaves the plot so 
unresolved that the text almost appears to mock the very notion of anagnorisis. In 
such cases, the reader, whose sense-making is arrested along with the character’s 
helpless groping, concludes the story with a feeling that it fails to accrue coherent 
meaning, that the “deep knowledge” below the narrated events is at best ambiguous 
and fluctuating. The uncompromising silence that such arrested epiphanies emit is 
to be found throughout Carver’s work, and one of its most illustrative examples 
occurs in the early, minimalist story “The Student’s Wife” (in Will You Please Be
Quiet, Please). Lying awake in her bedroom and faced with the approach of dawn after a gruelingly sleepless night, the young woman Nan suddenly experiences her environment with the clarity of epiphanic vision: she perceives the sunrise to be “terrible,” her husband seems “desperate in his sleep,” and the sheets of her bed become pale and “white[n] grossly before her eyes,” as if they were funeral shrouds. Her eerily vivid impressions make her “wet her lips with a sticking sound,” go “down on her knees,” and “put her hands out on the bed,” as if in prayer; the text closes with the following laconic line: “‘God,’ she said. ‘God, will you help us, God?’ she said” (131). As her arrested epiphany prevents her from understanding any of the reasons for her sense of menace, the reader is left as puzzled as Nan: as Saltzman aptly puts it, “Carver exits at the moment the [menacing] footsteps are heard” (Saltzman, “Looking” 43), so that not only the plot’s essential contour and meaning, but even its central conflicts remain blurred (this led various commentators to a great deal of conjecture: for an overview, see Person 69n.38).

“The Student’s Wife” is a type of story critics have dismissed or praised as representing Carver’s minimalist phase. Since in such stories, indeterminacy stems largely from the utmost reduction of materials, the arrested epiphany has been taken to be a typically minimalist device. But Carver’s employment of this device is even more baffling in his more verbose stories, those that I take to correspond to John Barth’s notion of a “long-winded minimalism” (Further Fridays 68). “What’s in Alaska?” (Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?), for instance, subverts the plot’s coherency not by the miniaturist reduction of the narrative but by an expansion that results in lengthy real-time renditions of seemingly insignificant events that appear to be largely unordered by any narratorial intelligence. Consider, for instance, the following naturalistic portrayal of banal conversations (quoted at length) between the story’s marijuana-dimmed characters:

“I know what would taste good and that’s some cream soda,” Jack said. Mary and Helen laughed.
“Go ahead and laugh,” Jack said, grinning. “Who wants some cream soda?”
“Some what?” Mary said.
“Some cream soda,” Jack said.
“You stood up like you were going to make a speech,” Mary said.
“I hadn’t thought of that,” Jack said. He shook his head and laughed. He sat down. “That’s good stuff,” he said.
“We should have got more,” Helen said.
“More what?” Mary said.
“More money,” Jack said.
“No money,” Carl said.
“Did I see some U-No bars in that sack?” Helen said.
“I bought some,” Carl said. “I spotted them the last minute.”
“U-No bars are good,” Jack said.
“They’re creamy,” Mary said. “They melt in your mouth.”
“We have some M and M’s and Popsicles if anybody wants any,” Jack said. Mary said, “I’ll have a Popsicle. Are you going to the kitchen?”
“Yeah, and I’m going to get the cream soda, too,” Jack said. “I just remembered. You guys want a glass?”
“Just bring it all in and we’ll decide,” Helen said. “The M and M’s too.”
“Might be better to move the kitchen out here,” Jack said.
“When we lived in the city,” Mary said, “people said you could see who’d turned on the night before by looking at their kitchen in the morning. We had a tiny kitchen when we lived in the city,” she said.
“We had a tiny kitchen too,” Carl said.
“I’m going out to see what I can find,” Jack said.
“I’ll come with you,” Mary said. (Will You Please 84-85)

Most striking about this monstrous effet de réel is a length that seems exorbitant in the light of the story’s relative brevity (roughly sixteen pages in the Vintage edition). One finds oneself rereading such passages in an attempt to identify any hidden meanings that would contribute to a thematic pattern, a central conceit towards which the narrative could be said to move, or simply anything that could be used to establish a recognizable plot structure. While there are a few hints of possible adultery, they are never spelled out conclusively; the text merely “subtly suggest[s] a series of conflicts that create a kind of subliminal tension to the reader” (Gentry and Stull 9). As a result of the story’s juxtaposition of de-hierarchized material, plot closure hinges on the extent to which the final, climactic epiphany resolves the data into a meaningful pattern. Yet the epiphanic moment with which the story concludes does not achieve even minimal congruence of theme: one of the protagonists, Carl, is shown lying restless in bed, staring into the darkness of his and his lover’s bedroom; suddenly he fancies he sees “something in the hall” with “a pair of small eyes”; though he cannot make out what exactly it is, it makes his “heart tur[n],” so that he sits up straight, grabs a pair of shoes, and waits “for it to move once more, to make the slightest noise” (Will You Please 93). Again, Carl’s vision is evidently a form of “sudden illumination,” but one that remains on the level of subliminal unease rather than offering recognition. The reader’s understanding of the story’s plot breaks down along with Carl’s endeavour to make sense of his situation, with the result that the “deep knowledge” implied by the text’s strong reality effect loses itself in narrative silence. In a romanticist or modernist context, perhaps, the indeterminacy of meaning that underlies Carl’s “moment of insight” would not seem quite as unusual, for the reader might not expect any coherent propositions from Carl’s experience. Yet the irony of Carver’s arrested epiphany lies in its location in a seemingly realist framework, one full with the promise of plot-resolution.

3. Carver’s Ironized Epiphany

It is this subversive use of the arrested epiphany that led critics to sum up Carver’s work as anti-epiphanic. Detractors have argued that it reflects Carver’s inadvertent misuse of epiphany and is the result of a groping amateur author describing “situations that often seem extremely weighty with portent, that almost visibly ache for release into climax or revelation, but then over and over again fail
to achieve it” (Aldridge 47); proponents, by contrast, take the dysfunctionality of the moment of insight to be an intentional subversion of realist claims and thus regard it as one of minimalism’s strengths (Clark; Herzinger). But the epistemological signature of Carver’s arrested epiphany is more varied than such critical assessments imply. The anti-realist effect of an arrested epiphany is not a direct result of the negativity expressed on the text’s rhetorical surface (i.e., the stating of a revelation that remains causally and thematically ambiguous), but depends on the extent to which the reader’s vision is limited to that of the character, and in this respect, Carver’s work is rather heterogeneous. Often enough, despite Carver’s preferred focalization of the narration through a center of consciousness, the reader’s interpretive efforts transcend the protagonists’ vision, so that the latter’s failure to understand his or her world increasingly becomes a source of irony rather than a real subversion of meaning.

The miniaturist “I Could See the Smallest Things” (What We Talk About When We Talk About Love), for instance, places its arrested epiphany within a functional framework in which the reader has a slight interpretive advantage. The story’s climax occurs when the narrator-protagonist Nancy, lying awake in bed at night, observes her husband, Cliff, drooling spittle in his sleep. The spittle suddenly reminds her of the snails in the garden that she just saw her neighbor, Sam, kill with poison. At first sight, her “revelation” seems blank, for she emphasizes her complete lack of understanding of her perception: “I don’t know,” she muses, “I didn’t have any more thoughts except the thought that I had to hurry up and sleep” (36). Thus, the text appears to have arrived at the same breakdown of meaning as had “The Student’s Wife” in Nan’s arrested epiphany. Yet a closer look reveals that Nancy’s lack of recognition does not hinder the interpretation of readers able to identify several possible referents of the symbolism in Nancy’s image. The text’s metaphorical undercurrents revolve around the fact that there may be an erotic tension between Nancy and Sam. Carver does not completely reveal the deeper meaning of the snail image, probably in order to evade triteness, for if indeed the text had established in an obvious manner Nancy’s infatuation with the neighbor, the imaging of her husband as a snail killed by his rival lover would have been rather obvious and predictable. Instead, Carver’s employment of Nancy’s arrested epiphany comes rather unexpectedly, so that the reader is in fact compelled to turn back a few pages in order to reread the originally inconspicuous encounters between Nancy and Sam. It is only upon reconsidering their deadpan conversation and closely examining the silences between their casual words that the reader, with the image of the snail in mind, is likely to suspect that there could be an erotic tension between Nancy and her neighbor, though this tension is never confirmed literally and requires a great deal of interpretive imagination. Moreover, the text does not reveal whether (or to what extent) any erotic tension can be said to apply to both parties, nor does it define whether Nancy’s imaging of her husband as a snail being killed by Sam should be taken to signify either her secret wish for or her
subliminal fear of adultery. Faced with Nancy’s arrested epiphany, the reader’s hermeneutical efforts may lead a few tentative interpretive steps further than Nancy’s stage of awareness. Thus while the epiphany neither effects the solid closure of those in such stories as “Fever,” nor the interpretive dead ends of “What’s in Alaska?” or “The Student’s Wife,” it has subtly slid from the arrested epiphany to what I would like to call an “ironized epiphany.” Carver’s employment of the rhetoric of revelation in “I Could See the Smallest Things” describes a middle road, one between anti-realist absence and realist presence. As Fluck has pointed out with regard to Carver’s work in general, it leads the reader into a progressive hermeneutic circle, but, “constantly moving between a promise of representative experience, its subversion, and its subsequent restitution,” it is one that eschews ultimate resolution (78).

4. Carver’s Comic Epiphany

But this equilibrium between absence and presence that some critics (notably Simmons) have taken to be characteristic of Carver’s location between realism and postmodernism is rather unstable, for the degree to which Carver’s arrested epiphany slides into an ironized one varies greatly. Indeed, it is a trademark of Carver’s most reductionist collection of stories, What We Talk About When We Talk About Love (1981), that the discrepancy between the helpless groping of the text’s centers of consciousness and the reader’s knowledge is sometimes heightened to the point of comedy. In these cases, the breakdown of the character’s sense-making often strengthens rather than destabilizes the story’s realist effect, with the result that the bleak blue-collar subject-matter acquires a certain lightness, as the reader cannot help being amused by the pathetic failures of characters to grasp their glaringly obvious problems. In Carver’s “One More Thing,” for example, the main character’s blinkered vision functions as the story’s central ironic twist, and the social problematics of Carver’s milieu—alcoholism and unemployment—seem reduced to functioning as a backdrop for the comedy of epistemological failure. The text focuses on the moment when L. D. is asked to leave by his wife Maxine and fifteen-year-old daughter Rae, because they are not prepared to bear his alcoholic stupor and aggression anymore. Faced with his family’s revolt, L. D. at first hurls a jar of pickles through the kitchen window, but then, in a parody of character development, he suddenly gains the “insight” that it is actually all for the best if he leaves, since his home is a “nuthouse” anyway, and he is better off alone (What We Talk About 157). “There’s another life out there,” he mutters and shows signs of relief. Just before he is out the door, he turns around, faces his family with a self-important gesture, and says: “I just want to say one more thing.” Yet, as the narrator concludes dryly, he cannot “think what it could possibly be” (159). In this case, of course, the reader is far ahead of Carver’s character, whose failed development has no subversive effects on the story’s meaning, as the plot has already become crystal-clear. Indeed, if L. D. had experienced a classically
realist anagnorisis of the kind that Carver pinned beside his desk (such as: “Suddenly it became clear to L. D. how much pain he caused to his family, and that he had to ‘dry-out’ and regain his moorings”), the story’s plot would have acquired a more optimistic core, but it would not have become any easier to interpret or more “realist.” Thus Chénetier’s assertion that the reader of such stories is merely left “tottering on the brink of certainty” (169) is only true for those readers who expect the text to spell out its meanings with unambiguous literal commentary.

Carver’s “A Serious Talk”—one of the highlights of his Cheshire-grinning treatment of the traditional moment of insight—is one of the most intriguing examples of how the ironized epiphany turns into a comic one and is reduced to a mere satirical flourish entirely irrelevant to the text’s overall plot closure. The story revolves around a deserted husband-cum-alcoholic, Burt, who cannot bring himself to come to terms with the fact that his ex-wife Vera has a new lover. That the tragic aspects of Burt’s suffering are counterpointed by the comic effect provided by his lack of theoretical awareness leads him to engage in a series of unwitting symptomatic acts (in the Freudian sense) whose underlying motivations are patently obvious to the reader. The story’s showdown begins with Burt’s discovery that Vera’s new lover left cigarette butts in a stoneware dish that was bought during the happier days of their marriage. Unable to cope with the symbolized presence of his rival, Burt disturbs Vera’s dinner preparations with a number of provocative pranks until, asking him to leave, she threatens to call the police. Before he starts for the exit, he grabs the dish/ashtray, and, as Vera demands that he put “the ashtray” down, he assumes the histrionic posture of an athlete ready to hurl a discus and walks proudly through the patio door, as if he had made a significant point. Sitting in his car, he congratulates himself that “he had proved something” and “made something clear” (What We Talk About 112-13), and he makes a mental note that he and Vera have to have “a serious talk soon.” The ironization of Burt’s “epiphany” emerges clearly in his inability to express exactly what he wants to discuss with Vera, for his conceptualization stops at the abstract notions of “something” or “things” that will have to be dealt with:

There were things he wanted to say, grieving things, consoling things, things like that [. . .]. The thing was, they had to have a serious talk soon. There were things that needed talking about, important things that had to be discussed. They’d talk again [after] things got back to normal. (111, 113)

The final blow to his credibility—and the story’s ultimate lapse into farce, or at least tragicomedy—comes with Burt’s failed attempt to translate his epiphanic illumination into words: trying to grasp what exactly he feels he needs to discuss with his wife, he concludes that he will “tell her the goddamn ashtray was a goddamn dish, for example” (113). In this case, Carver undercuts the epiphany with an ironic lack of self-awareness in the character that is comical rather than detrimental to the stability of plot because readers will have already arrived at the interpretive stage Burt fails to reach.
Particularly in his later work, Carver’s tongue-in-cheek ironization of his protagonists’ attempts at understanding reality occasionally turns into a mannerism that is but a step away from the tricks of 1960s metafictionists,\(^{10}\) the only difference being that his blue-collar heroes express their epistemological or linguistic skepticism with the groping colloquial language of their sociolects rather than with modernist pathos or postmodernist stylization. Typical examples of Carver at his most mannerist ironization of the epiphanic moment of insight are the helpless “babbling” of the narrator-protagonist of “Whoever Was Using This Bed” (faced with his wife’s question of whether he would stop the life support system if she lay in an indefinite coma)—

I don’t say anything right away. What am I supposed to say? They haven’t written the book on this one yet. I need a minute to think. I know it won’t cost me anything to tell her I’ll do whatever she wants. It’s just words, right? Words are easy. But there’s more to it than this; she wants an honest response from me. And I don’t know what I feel about it yet. I shouldn’t be hasty. I can’t say something without thinking about what I’m saying, about consequences, about what she’s going to feel when I say it—whatever it is I say.  

(Where I’m Calling From 439)

—or the colloquial and rambling linguistic skepticism of the narrator of “Intimacy”:

I look outside and, Jesus, there’s this white moon hanging in the morning sky. I can’t think when I’ve ever seen anything so remarkable. But I’m afraid to comment on it. I am. I don’t know what might happen. I might break into tears even. I might not understand a word I’d say.  

(Where I’m Calling From 452)

In these rare instances, Carver ironizes the epiphanic illumination so thoroughly that his characters metamorphose into caricatures in the tradition of Fielding’s Mrs. Slipslop or Sheridan’s Mrs. Malaprop—except that whenever they are faced with philosophical or moral problems, they do not produce malapropisms but merely confess that they would rather be silent or cannot possibly think of anything to say. It is these more facetious examples of Carver’s ironized epiphany that may have prompted Madison Bell to complain that the author establishes the text’s meaning “right over the heads of his own narrators,” who “come to resemble rats negotiating a maze that the reader can see and they cannot,” with the result that their “gee-whiz, \textit{faux-naïf} comportment is not always convincing” (67). But if one perceives Carver’s comic epiphany without traditionally realist expectations, it can be said to mark an intriguing renegotiation of the moment of insight. It enables Carver to let the text culminate in the climactic gesture that focuses the reader’s attention on the central ethical or epistemological problem with which the text is concerned, even if it is discussed over the head of its center of consciousness. At the same time, the comic epiphany subverts too obvious meanings with silences—as the narrator’s inability to discuss and explore the issue prevents the full closure of more pedagogical realisms. The narrator of the final passage in Carver’s “Why Don’t You Dance?” puts the aesthetic gist of this literary strategy in a nutshell. Her
inability to grasp the logic underlying her story is quite ironic in the face of the reader’s interpretive advantage. Yet her realization that there is “more to [the story]” (What We Talk About 10) than what she is able to conceptualize also serves as a skepticist reminder to the reader that there is always potentially “more to it,” that due to the overall ambiguity of Carver’s symbolism one can never be absolutely sure about the reliability of one’s own interpretation.

5. Conclusion

In summary, Carver’s use of epiphanic rhetoric is too varied to conform to the kind of aesthetic stereotypes with which the various camps in the debates on postmodernism and realism have attempted to differentiate progressive from regressive literature. Thus the critical claims that Carver either moved beyond, subverted, or reinscribed traditional concepts of epiphany—and consequently adheres to a unified aesthetics, epistemology, or politics (realist, post- or post-postmodernist)—are misleading and ignore the differing narrative frameworks in which his epiphanic moments are located. Particularly Carver’s favored negations of epiphanic anagnorisis (i.e., “suddenly I realize something, but I do not understand what it is”) vary too greatly in their effects on plot closure to be usefully evaluated if they are disconnected from their specific functional contexts. In some of his early stories (“What’s in Alaska?” or “The Student’s Wife”) the negation leads to the complete breakdown of meaning, while in many (but not all) of the stories of his middle phase it is directed at comic relief rather than subversion. Its most intriguing use, I think, occurs when the slippage from the arrested to the ironized epiphany remains as subtle as in “I Could See the Smallest Things,” where the epiphanic moment provides the reader enough symbolic meaning to embark on the hermeneutic journey, but at the same time remains enigmatic enough to prevent arrival at final closure. Yet, again, to elevate this more subtle use of the ironized epiphany to Carver’s literary trademark would obscure his extraordinary stylistic versatility. Indeed, Carver appears to subvert or reinscribe the tradition of the epiphanic moment in various ways and whenever it suits his particular narrative purposes, and thus his technique is irreducible to a single aesthetic outlook.

Notes

1 Beja’s point reflects a consensus in recent criticism: Robert Langbaum speaks of “a visionary significance that cannot be stated as a meaning” (40). Ashton Nichols’s outline of a poetics of epiphany likens epiphanic moments to “oracles” that “tend to speak in equivocal ways” (xii) and “leave open the ultimate meaning of the experience” (21). Martin Bidney’s recent attempt at locating author-specific epiphanic patterns considers “inexplicability” (Patterns 2) as a defining feature; “true epiphanies,” he says in another study, are not “rationally accountable” (“The Aesthetic” 130n. 8).
The convergence of epiphany and recognition in classic realism may have to do with epistemological factors. To the extent that nineteenth-century positivism upgrades the particular, endowing it with monist notions of spiritual significance, the recognition of hard facts becomes “poeticized” with metaphysical overtones, even if the “spiritual” is secularized and must be understood metaphorically. Moreover, classic realism appears to prefer the Hegelian to the Kantian epistemology, from the viewpoint of which the aesthetic presence that defines epiphanic illumination is potentially translatable into clear-cut concepts.

Martin Bidney’s enlightening analysis of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, though aimed at interpretive purposes different from mine, offers further examples of how writers like Tolstoy hierarchize their open-ended naturalism by structuring it with epiphanic rhetoric that may seem “mysterious” at first, but that the reader can translate into a conceptual framework, in the case of Tolstoy’s novel, a “vision of history” (*Patterns* 156). As Bidney points out, the epiphanic pattern in *War and Peace* has “a strong totalizing tendency quite at variance with any Bakhtinian dialogism that *War and Peace* may otherwise exhibit” (156). It achieves a separation of the novel’s agents into those belonging to a “Tolstoyan reality” and others who “live in a world of unreality” (169). In other words, the text achieves plot closure by making epiphanic rhetoric counter rather than produce indeterminacy of meaning.

It seems to me that the charge of Carver’s “literary republicanism” overrates the “decline” of realism in the wake of the metafictional and fabulist heyday of the 1960s. It is inarguable that the realist poetics, since its nineteenth-century beginnings, has remained fairly dominant in America in various guises and combinations, and not only in the form of popular fiction that critics tend to dismiss as irrelevant, but as the preferred idiom of a number of authors whom the literary establishment considers as highly literary (cf. Opdahl, Bradbury).

More famous examples associated with both minimalism and neorealism are Jay McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984) and Bobbie Ann Mason’s *In Country* (1985). Even Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, whose long-winded minimalism tilts towards metafiction, features this narrative pattern, if in a slightly ironized way: “I’m startled by the suddenness of what I guess passes for an epiphany,” serial killer Patrick Bateman mumbles between dismembering his victims, but also realizes: “there is no catharsis. I gain no deeper knowledge about myself, no new understanding can be extracted from my telling” (377-78).

Meyer, speaking of Carver’s “hour-glass pattern,” posits a development from an initial realism via a minimalist detour to a more mature realism (other advocates of this opinion are Stull, Shute, and Scott). Their argument that Carver’s “true pulse” is essentially realist, is based on the dubious claim that his more enigmatic stories are artistic failures.

Cf. Beja’s criteria of “incongruity” and “insignificance” (16, 18), ones confirmed by Nichols 28 and Tigges 13. Bidney considers these criteria too strict.
and proposes the more abstract definition “disproportion between the moment and its extensive meanings” (Patterns 3).

8 Carver’s arrested epiphanies differ in kind from the epiphanic grasp of negativity that Robert Langbaum describes as “negative epiphany,” characterized by experiences that offer “insights into the abyss” (42), “into the puzzle of human existence” (Tigges 22n.18) or lead to an “understanding” of the “absurdity” of existence (31), such as the Sartrean nausea. These variants of Northrop Frye’s “demonic epiphany” (223) are defined by the sudden recognition of negativity, while in Carver’s arrested epiphany any sort of recognition, be it positive or negative, remains absent or suspended.

9 Carver’s work is replete with the kind of Symptomhandlung Freud describes in his Psychopathology of Everyday Life, a seemingly meaningless act that nevertheless has a deep psychological significance and thus provides Carver’s at first sight enigmatic stories with a “teasing” symbolism (Saltzman, Understanding 42). In Burt’s case, the symptomatic act, consisting in his apparently accidental blundering about in his ex-wife’s flat (toppling cakes, stacking the fireplace so badly that the house nearly burns down, and the like), in reality is not accidental but symptomatic of his jealousy. To the extent that the reader understands Burt’s subliminal intentionality, the latter is transformed into a comic figure.

10 A classic example of literary postmodernism’s parody of the epiphanic moment occurs in John Barth’s early novel The End of the Road, whose protagonist intermittently suffers from an extended epiphanic vision he cannot terminate: “My eyes, as Winckelmann said inaccurately of the eyes of the Greek statues, were sightless, gazing on eternity, fixed on ultimacy [...] It is the malady cosmopsis, the cosmic view, that afflicted me. When one has it, one is frozen like the bullfrog when the hunter’s light strikes him full in the eyes, only with cosmopsis there is no hunter, and no quick hand to terminate the moment—there’s only the light” (323; see also Losey, who compares Barth’s with other variants of postmodernist epiphany).

Works Cited


