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THE REALISM OF "SURFACES" AND "DISCONNECTIONS": VARIETIES OF AMERICAN MINIMALIST PROSE

The aim of the present article is to have a closer look at the type of writing which becomes prominent in the early 1980s, when the most overtly experimental wave of American postmodernism found itself in eclipse. I want to discuss some general characteristics of the so-called minimalist prose and to see how it relates not only to postmodernism *sensu largo*, but also to traditional realism, whose contemporary resurgence it is often considered to be. However, since any theoretical position aimed at "totalization" must inevitably reveal its weaknesses when tested against individual cases, I shall refer my generalizations throughout to the stories written by Grace Paley, Raymond Carver and Ann Beattie.¹ It is important to privilege neither sameness nor difference in the discussion of minimalism, which is by no means a uniform phenomenon, but rather to embrace a kind of thinking based on the recognition of both.

NEOREALISTS—WHO THEY ARE

The mainstream of American literature in the 1960s and 1970s was dominated by the postmodernist aesthetics, that is by the anti-realist, self-consciously experimental, parodic and game-oriented kind of writing, represented by John Barth, William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, William Gass, Robert Coover, Kurt Vonnegut or "surfictionists" like Ronald Sukenick or Raymond Federman. In the early 1980s we can observe a gradual wearing-off or "exhaustion" of the postmodernist fabulative and metafictional strategies, which was accompanied by a growing nostalgia for the lost simplicity and

¹ All three writers have often been mentioned in the context of minimalism, though recently only Carver and Beattie are seen as representative cases. Paley has been claimed as "mother figure" by feminist critics or as "midfictionist" by critics like Alan Wilde, who argues for excluding her from the ranks of "narrow" realists (Wilde 1987:175ff). I have selected 3 collections of stories from each author: Paley's *The Little Disturbances of Man* (1959), *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (1974), and *Later the Same Day* (1985); Carver's *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976), *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), and *Cathedral* (1983); Beattie's *Distortions* (1976), *The Burning House* (1983), and *Where You'll Find Me and Other Stories* (1986).

immediacy of fictional expression. Among the first to notice this change were such critics as Jerome Klinkowitz and Alan Wilde, the former speaking about "experimental realism" of Walter Abish, Gilbert Sorrentino, Thomas McGuane, Grace Paley or Richard Yates, the latter calling for the recognition of the so-called "mid-fictional" mode in Paley, Donald Barthelme, Max Apple or Stanley Elkin, the writers who, according to Wilde, manage to negotiate the oppositional extremes of realism and metafiction.²

At the same time, there is evidence of the increasing popularity of short stories which radically depart from both the traditional modernist ("well made") and postmodernist canons. The new generation of authors (e.g. Ann Beattie, Bobbie Ann Mason, Frederick Barthelme, Raymond Carver, Stephen Dixon, Tobias Wolff, Mary Robinson, Jane Anne Phillips, Jean Thompson) and the older writers whose work has long been neglected or overlooked (e.g. Grace Paley, Cynthia Ozick, Leonard Michaels) begin to enjoy readers' and critics' greater interest. They are said to exemplify "new realism" or neorealism, sometimes even "dirty realism" or simply the minimalist tendency in recent American writing, which in the larger context of postmodernism can be viewed as the return of the suppressed need for more or less realistically or referentially grounded varieties of prose.

"Everyday reality" retrieves its central place in the stories by Paley, Beattie and Carver, despite the individual differences in their attitude to realism and their understanding of the function of writing. Paley's "realism" has more to do with inventing or with an empathic effort of the imagination. As she herself puts it: "what we need right now is to imagine the real... [So] men have got to imagine the lives of women, of all kinds of women [...] White people have to imagine the reality, not the invention, but the reality of the lives of people of color. Imagine it, imagine that reality, and understand it. We have to imagine what is happening in Central America today, in Lebanon and South Africa" (1986:251). Thus at the heart of her "imaginative realism" lies an active engagement with the world. As various critics observe, she "reconciles the demands of avant-garde or postmodern form for structural openness and the primacy of the surface with the seemingly incompatible demands of traditional realist material" (De Koven 1981:217); she writes consciously as a woman, from "the marginalized space of motherhood," articulating alternative versions of experience (Hulley 1982:9); in her stories, she emphasizes "possibility over choice, openness instead of ownership, and multiplicity rather than oneness" (Meier 1982:126). In opposition to the "Fatherly" discourse, she wants to be "anti-symbolical" and refuses to write "about meaning beyond the meaning" (Paley 1982:34). Thus her stories are like "a web, a tapestry, something woven or embroidered, or a PATCHWORK — feminine handiwork" (Park 1985:486).

²Cf. J. Klinkowitz's, *Literary Subversions...* (1985) and A. Wilde's *Middle Grounds...* (1987).

Beattie writes the *New Yorker* type of story, marked by sophistication and understatement. Her minimalist message is *Aim for Grace*³ and for her grace seems to be a matter of elegant style and quiet acceptance. The essence of "realism" for her is to find "the exceptional way to articulate the ordinary... [because] even ordinary things confuse us" (Beattie 1987:XVII). The way she talks about writing corresponds with what she tries to do in her fiction; writers to her, are "divers into metaphors and parachutists over distant lands of discontinuity." The writer's task is disassembling, finding disparities, complexities, and oddities "beneath what might have passed for coherence" (*ibid.* XII). Indeed, in her stories there is a curious split between what is "objectively" registered on the surface and what is left to silence but nevertheless implied. She is interested in distortions (the title of her early collection) not only in human life but also in the method of presentation. Her narratives operate by means of metonymic associations, often quite arbitrary. She, too, wants to resist a temptation of metaphor. As one critic observes, there are always two stories told by Beattie: "the open story [of the present] juxtaposed with a closed story of the subjective past, a story the speaker tries hard not to tell" (McKinstry 1987:111 – 112). Thus what we have in Beattie is a displacement, a metonymy of desire, the world in the state of lack: the absent is made present to us as "through metonymic transformations, the physical world evokes the emotional" (*ibid.* 116).

Carver is included among the "catatonic realists" for the coolness and detachment of his narrative voice, scarcity of commentary and authorial assistance, and his elliptical, spare style (Wilde 1987:112). According to Wilde, his narrative strategies reflect "a defense against desire and despair alike" (*ibid.*), which he projects upon his characters. He openly declares his preference for "the traditional [...] methods of storytelling: one layer of reality unfolding and giving way to another, perhaps richer layer" (Carver 1986:XIII). One can say that "realism" for him consists in defamiliarization of the ordinary, since his stories often produce a peculiar effect of "disjuncture that comes from being in a place where things *appear* to be real and familiar" (McCaffery and Gregory 1987:66). Like other minimalists, he is alert to the creative potential of language and therefore believes that "stories are closer in spirit to poems than they are to novels" (Carver 1986:XVI) because of "the compression of language and emotion, [...] and the care and control required to achieve their effect," and also the importance of the controlling image (McCaffery and Gregory:73).

The confrontation with a kind of prose written by Paley, Beattie or Carver poses a certain difficulty to a critic, as it seems to defy his commentary. But on closer inspection their writing turns out to be deceptively simple. In fact, it is no less mannered or stylized or particularized, "informed by a discomforting and sometimes elusive irony" (Buford 1983:5), than postmodernist fiction itself.

³The phrase comes from the end of the story *Learning to Fall*, included in *The Burning House*.

However, most commentators refuse to see it in its complexity and prefer to view it as a highly reductive form. Suffice it to quote two reviewers:

"American minimalism", a mannerist mode in which the intentional poverty, the anorexia of the writer's style is mimetic of the spiritual poverty of his or her characters' lives, their disconnection from anything like a traditional community. It is a prose so attenuated that it can't support the weight of a past or a future, but only a bare notation of what happens now; a "slice of life" in which the characters are seen without the benefit of antecedents or social context. They rarely have last names. (Gorra 1984:155)

In a similar vein, the minimalists are accused of being

astonishingly incurious about any experience, person, place or time beyond their tightly absorbed selves [...] Their stories—brief snatches of unadorned randomness devoid of motives, causes, consequences — take place in a timeless present, [they are] full of offhand gestures, disjointed perceptions, fragments of banal talk [...] The moral, social, and historical implications that would be explored by traditional novelists have no place in minimalist fiction. Immediacy is everything and ideas rooted in a sense of the past are heresy. (Bell 1987:99)

No wonder then that the writers themselves dismiss the "minimalist" label, finding in it—as Carver does—"something [...] that smacks of smallness of vision and execution" (Simpson 1983:210).

MINIMALISM—WHAT IT IS

In order to account for lumping together the authors as different as Paley, Carver or Beattie, not to mention the others, it will be useful now to examine briefly the generally shared assumptions and strategies of minimalist writing. First of all, in all these authors one can notice the strong privileging of the quotidian, of the ordinary and the mundane. They write about unattractive people, unassuming and ordinary: these may be lonely housewives and single mothers, the occupants of cheap New York apartments and children's playgrounds (Paley); frustrated, emotionally estranged middle-class couples (Beattie); or alcoholics, losers, obsessives and drifters, common people of the working-class (Carver). Very often these are people who are "inarticulate, who can't verbalize their plights, who often don't seem to really grasp what is happening to them" (McCaffery and Gregory:78). Indeed, Chekhov's advice quoted by Carver in an interview, that it is not necessary "to write about extraordinary people who accomplish extraordinary and memorable deeds" (Simpson:213), seems to be endorsed by all contemporary minimalists. They store up bits and pieces of daily life, not only presenting clipped, fragmentary experiences, but also enhancing this fragmentation, dissociation and disconnectedness on the thematic level: by addressing the problems of relationships in the process of breaking down, people disconnected from each other, from their past, emotionally constricted (Beattie); people dissociated from their selves, alienated observers (Carver); or the experience of discontinuity, separation and loss through birth, death and divorce (Paley).

This sense of disconnectedness and disjunction of ordinary existence is also reflected on the level of style and formal structuring. In general, the minimalist style is plain, spare, lean and taut; it tends to be free of rhetorical ornament, sometimes seems over-transparent in its insistence on the use of the colloquial language and idiom. With Carver and Beattie, the quality of style often becomes photo-realistic: "the sentences are stripped of adornment, and maintain complete control on the simple objects and events they ask us to witness" (Buford:5). However, if there is one common denominator of various minimalist authors, it is their sensitivity to the wide range of voices within their fiction. Hence their fascination with the recordedlike quality of dialogues, frequent use of the monologic persona-pieces with an extremely restricted point of view, or—in the stories with a less "situated" perspective—establishing the objective, neutral voice telling the story in free indirect speech.

These are de-centered stories, in which the authorial presence seems to be limited. In place of the author's control, what we have for example in Paley, is the style which reverberates with "an echo of the voices ['stolen' from the world], received by the writer's meticulously receptive ear" (Morley 1982:70).⁴ To illustrate this quality of Paley's style, one can recall here two stories from the volume *Later the Same Day*, "Lavinia: An Old Story" and "A Man Told Me the Story of His Life," the first being a monologue of the Negro woman concerned about her daughter mediocre life, the second registering the voice of a Puerto Rican cook who wanted to be a doctor. In Carver, the humdrum speech rhythms, the predominant elliptical mode of his voices, suggest the dullness of the characters' lives. It transpires, for example, from the condensed banality of the conversation of two couples in the title story from *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. To quote a critical comment, "This is realistic writing of a different sort—a probe stuck beneath the skin of dissociation itself. Passivity is the strength of this language; little seems to be said, yet much is conveyed... [Carver's] voice is that of dissociation [...] as laconic [and flat] as the outward lives of his characters" (Boxer and Phillips 1979:81). Similarly, Beattie's stories abound in linguistic ellision, her voices are often disembodied, trying to disguise the gap between the emotional past and the seemingly objective present by means of analytical detachment, photographic descriptions and deliberate silences. A striking example is the story *The Parking Lot* from the volume *Distortions*, where the action involving the married woman's affair with a stranger seems totally gratuitous and the emotion is swept under the surface of the dispassionate narrative voice. Thus the minimalist prose creates not only the illusion of a "storyless story", in its commitment to apparently disjointed fragments, but also of an "authorless story", in its extraordinary power to articulate different voices.

⁴Paley's New York City is saturated with voices: "Irish, Puerto Rican, black, Jewish, of all degrees of [...] intellectuality and education [of different generations], a continuing festival of difference" (Park 1985:484).

Formally, the minimalist obsession with the theme of dissociation and disconnection is reflected by the preference for discontinuous devices, arbitrary and open endings, narrative omissions, interplay of surface details, and anti-linear plots. At the first glance, the stuff of minimalist fiction is, to use Virginia Woolf's phrase, "the surface with its hard separate facts." Again, a closer look must reveal what is hidden beyond those seductive surfaces. In Paley, "a sense of the surface of things, the ordinary disturbances of everyday life" rather than depths, become part of her programmatic subversion of the patriarchal, "Fatherly" discourse. To quote Kathleen Hulley, "The disseminating effect of Paley's writing is produced precisely by the dislocated presence of voices and bodies, surfaces which mutually displace one another [...] and hold open the possibility for indeterminacy which permits multiple levels to exist simultaneously" (Hulley:12). Beattie's techniques also work to represent the surfaces of a world perceived as surface; nevertheless, the accumulation of surface details literalizes the emptiness, triviality and bewilderment of the people she presents. In Carver, the manipulation of surfaces on the one hand produces the unsettling effect of the defamiliarization of the ordinary, while on the other, it objectifies the confusion, turmoil or the emotional violence of the people he portrays. In all cases, we must listen to what is not being told so as to comprehend the tales.

What characterizes the structure of minimalist stories is the avoidance of closure, shunning of the classic conflict-development-resolution structure for the sake of ambiguous, suspended or open endings. Again, Paley's stories are amazingly associative and discursive; in their "alleatory digressiveness [they] appear casually structured, almost formless (needless to say, they are carefully if unconventionally structured)" (De Koven 1986:315). Sometimes so many memories, discussions or revaluations enter and disrupt the movement of the narrative that the story ends before it could even begin. Typical, in this respect, are such pieces as *In This Country, But In Another Language*, *My Aunt Refuses to Marry the Man Everyone Wants Her To*, *Mother* or *The Story Hearer* from *Later the Same Day*. Of Beattie's stories, Margaret Atwood says that "these stories are not of suspense but of suspension" (after McKinstry:113). For example, *Marshall's Dog* or *It's Just Another Day (Distortions)* can be said to end before they are told: there is no epiphany, the narrative simply exhausts itself and expires. In this way, the arbitrary nature of the presented reality is further reinforced. Similarly, in Carver one can notice the same static or ambiguous, open-ended quality. His elliptical endings, like Beattie's, often produce the sense of aimlessness.

Of course open-endedness is only part of the generally anti-linear orientation of minimalism. This is most visible in Paley's overt contestation of the traditional plot, discussed in the story *A Conversation with My Father*. She rejects the linear plot because for her linearity cannot fully account for the complexities and ironies of human existence. The subversion of linearity occurs throughout in Carver's and Beattie's stories which present disconnected

physical movements, elliptical dialogues, overheard, directionless conversations. It seems that such a stance reflects the "minimalist world-view," embracing reality in its randomness and indeterminacy. It also allows for the possibility of chance or, in Paley's words, for "the enormous changes at the last minute." The stories are as open-ended as life itself and thus they continually remind us that nothing can be taken for granted. The minimalist techniques "have the curious effect of making the arbitrary seem real, or perhaps of revealing how arbitrary is the real" (Porter 1985:16).

We have come to an interesting point here, namely the question of the interrelatedness of the minimalist practice and the increased popularity of short stories. There seems to be little doubt about the fact that the recent short story revival owes much of its impetus to minimalist prose. Not accidentally, the expansive novel form seems to be favourite in the hands of postmodernist authors, since it allows for intricate plotting, elaborate structuring and accumulation of formal devices. One can suppose that the preference for the short story seems to correspond with the minimalists' coupling of interest in the quotidian and their view of the world as full of limitations and control. What comes to mind is Walter Benjamin's argument that "the story, as opposed to the novel, focuses on the most *ordinary* of things. While the novel [...] attempts to fathom the 'meaning of life', stories are both focused and based upon the ordinary: the ability to exchange experiences, the reality of boredom, and both the usualness and the authority of death" (after Schleifer 1985:36). It should be remembered, however, that the minimalists reject the model of a well-made story, with its traditional character portrayal, conventional plot structure and psychological, social and cultural background.

Bearing in mind the above characteristics of minimalism, it should not be difficult to name just a few literary and artistic influences recognizable in minimalist writers. Among the literary influences, usually acknowledged, first of all, is Kafka's and Beckett's prose: the former for the nightmarish quality of his realism; the latter, especially in *Trilogy*, for the voice almost verging on silence. The affinity with Gertrude Stein is perceivable as well: she was one of the pioneers of the method of writing which takes words as the starting point in the construction of the "real". However, most often recalled is Hemingway's literary style: the minimalists share its restraintful, stripped-down quality. Some critics point to the similarities with the French *nouveau roman* whose practitioners apparently also "preferred disembodied voices to [life-like] characters and concentrated on the physical detail of surface" (Bell 1987: 99–100). Minimalism owes something to the so-called "new journalism" of the 1960s which, according to Jerome Klinkowitz, has kept up the interest in recording "manners", that is the traditional stuff of realistic fiction neglected by postmodernism.⁵ To all those one can add the non-literary inspiration derived

⁵ Cf. Klinkowitz's remark that the techniques rejected by the innovative novel of the sixties, "such as coherent characterization, linear plot, and all the familiar routines from dialogue to symbolism – could now be used by the journalist" (1986:6).

from film, with its techniques of dramatic juxtaposition of scenes and cuts, and, finally, the impact of contemporary painting such as "photorealism" or "superrealism" or "found art". The painters, like their minimalist counterparts in literature, are similarly drawn to surfaces and attempt to defamiliarize the conventionally realistic in a shocking way.

BETWEEN REALISM AND POSTMODERNISM

As I said earlier, minimalism came to the prominence in the early 1980s. Its emergence was often associated with a renewed interest in more referential writing, simpler than those doctrinaire experimentalist pieces produced by some metafictionists or surfictionists. Thus minimalism is sometimes seen, on the one hand, as revitalization of realism (hence also referred to as neorealism) and, on the other hand, as reaction against postmodernist excess. I would like now to try to revise this statement a little by referring minimalism to both a more traditional type of realism, whose successor it is supposed to be, and postmodernism – innovative and experimental – which it is assumed to bypass.

Even when we compare the ideological and philosophical assumptions underlying traditional realism and contemporary minimalism, we can see a characteristic disparity. In Stern's by now classic definition, "realists leave in place the *fundamental* assumptions of the world they set out to describe", or simply they take reality for granted.⁶ Recent realists, however, seem to share with their postmodernist colleagues the conviction that the world is random and contingent rather than defined and governed by some stable set of rules, truths and laws. The consequences of this typically postmodern outlook endorsed by the minimalist writers are visible in their style and themes. We can briefly recall here Paley's story *A Conversation with My Father* as emblematic of the relationship between traditional realism, represented by Father, and the daughter's newer understanding of realism. Her father wants a story with the traditional plot, true to life and properly ended, whereas the narrator despises this "absolute line between two points", as she calls it, because "it takes away all hope" and "everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life". In fact, these two "realisms" offer different versions of perceiving and apprehending "reality". The Father's story is focused on the disclosure of the 'told', while the daughter's story subverts the finality of the 'told' by calling attention also to the telling of the tale. Thus for the daughter "to articulate the real is not just to describe it [but] rather to create, to find a language" which could give fictional, imaginative life to the most familiar affairs.⁷

In a more traditional type of realism, as written for example by Saul Bellow, John Updike or Bernard Malamud, we have a balance between scene and

⁶Cf. J. P. Stern, *On Realism* (1973).

⁷Cf. Klinkowitz 1985:73.

description and we are assisted by the authorial commentary when necessary. The purpose of those realists is first and foremost to create an identifiable and recognizable "character". Thus it can be said that the emphasis here indeed falls on PRODUCT or on 'told'. In minimalist fiction we can observe a greater reliance on scene, on the dramatic orchestration of voices — often disconnected or fused with their backgrounds. Thus here the emphasis is simultaneously on 'telling' or on PROCESS. Perhaps it would be right to say that minimalism does not set out to provide a description of the empirical world, as did traditional realism, but rather to explore the limits of our perception of this world (hence its "situated" perspectives.) Or, as Alan Wilde puts it, the minimalists reject "the assumption of a world as at once immutable and independent of *creative intervention*" (Wilde:185).

What follows from the above observations is a discovery that minimalism seems to have a lot in common with postmodernism, especially in its premise that reality is basically available through language. Thus both minimalism and postmodernism can be said to depart from William Gass's perception of the verbal character of literature: the substance of fiction is for both *words*.⁸ In Ann Beattie's phrase, "Beyond our vision, what we have is language—the written word" (1987:XIII). Similarly, Paley admits via the poet from the story *Enormous Changes At the Last Minute* that it is the WORD that "does the dreaming for you" (130). Like the narrator in *Debts (Enormous Changes At the Last Minute)*, for whom telling her tales is an obligation "to save a few lives", Paley deliberately wants to "prolong" the life of her friends and family in the form of words on the page. The medium she uses is highly creative: her language is inventive, arresting, startling. As Hulley says about Paley, "It is not the real world which gives us language, but language which makes the world substantial" (Hulley:15).

Perhaps this particular importance attached to the creative power of the medium explains why the minimalist stories, like postmodernist fiction in general, sacrifice interest in character-psychology in the classic sense for the sake of foregrounding of the relationship between language and character. In what way the character is "built up" by language can be best illustrated by Carver's treatment of this problem. Rather than mechanically reproducing spoken language, he distills and condenses the narrative voices in his fiction, so that the voice becomes the only medium through which the character is accessible, all other "authorial" resources, such as commentary, imagery or metaphor, being discarded when not coming from that voice itself. As some critics observe, Carver's language "dictates rather than embodies his characters' predicament" (Gorra 1984:156) or, about the author himself, "Carver has *not* given a voice to his characters; he has given his characters to a voice" (Arias-Misson 1982:628).

⁸Cf. W. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (1970).

All this suggests that minimalists, like postmodernists, are not deaf to what Alan Wilde calls the "poststructuralist disquisitions on the fictionality of the self" (Wilde:105) and that their fiction likewise abandons the anthropocentric models. Moreover, minimalist prose seems to share another postmodernist characteristic, namely ahistoricism. One can recall here that for postmodernists history and memory appear as yet different forms of fictionalization, whereas minimalists have often been accused that their writing remains rooted in the sense of entrapment in the present. What unites the two is then a basic anti-illusionism, although the anti-illusionist stance is realized by radically different means. In the case of postmodernism, it is usually flaunting artifice; in the case of minimalism, it is the unconventional use of conventional realistic methods. Perhaps then another way to understand minimalism would be to see that, in place of postmodernist fascination with fiction-making processes and celebration of artifice and excess in composition, the minimalists substitute their interest in the presence of artifice in everyday life, in the artificiality and convention lurking in the familiar and the mundane.

Coming to the conclusions, I would like to stress that the current vogue in realistic fiction cannot be treated in terms of reaction against the full-blown, anti-mimetic postmodernist experimentation of the 1960s and 1970s. Sharing a number of premises with realism and postmodernism alike, minimalist fiction nevertheless avoids giving primacy either to the world, as does traditional realism, or to language alone, as does metafiction. Despite any claims to the contrary, minimalist stories reveal a more experimental sense of realism and are in fact quite sophisticated, not devoid of metafictional concerns. This is so because reflexivity in the minimalist stories is treated not as the antithesis of referentiality but as its complement, whereas the two are absolutely incompatible for postmodernists. A number of Paley's, Beattie's and Carver's stories turn out to be *also* about their own telling: the already mentioned *Conversation With My Father*, *Love, Wants*, or *The Floating Truth* by Paley; Carver's *Put Yourself In My Shoes* from the volume *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*; or Beattie's *Snow* from *Where You'll Find Me*. In Carver, reflexivity frequently assumes the form of voyeurism, which is a suitable metaphor for writing: voyeurism "functions as a substitute for experience and involvement [and as such it's closely] linked to the writer's art" (Boxer and Phillips:79). In Beattie, the reflexive doubling of the stories often occurs by means of "inserted" photographs, as for example in the story *In the White Night (Where You'll Find Me)*, where the necessity to adjust two separate images in the camera which belonged to the protagonists' dead daughter parallels the technique of the story's own composition. In Paley, according to Klinkowitz, realistic conventions become the materials of metafiction itself for her, "metafiction—fiction which explores the conditions of its own making—is a peculiarly social matter, filled with the stuff of realism other metafictionists have discarded" (Klinkowitz 1985:71).

My strategy so far has been to round off individual differences in order to arrive at some set of common traits of minimalist fiction. The characteristic attraction to fragment and detail, the anti-metaphorical and anti-ornamental style, the insistence on dialogue or the extremely restricted narrative voice, the lack of traditional character portrayal, the limited action and the limited social or cultural background—all such features are shared to some degree by Paley, Beattie and Carver. One cannot, however, ignore the significant differences between these authors, the differences which were already signalled at the beginning, concerning their attitude to realism. To elaborate my earlier comments, a few words can be added about their individual treatment of the way in which meanings are constructed and revealed. Thus for Paley, there is no "privileged meaning"—she prefers the mode of "patchwork", which allows her to articulate the multiple voice of the Mother; Beattie's dominant mode is "metonymic"—suggesting *displacement*, in contrast to Paley's *inclusion*—and corresponds to the frustration of desire, which occurs throughout in her stories; Carver's mode is uniquely "metaphoric", relying on *replacement* which makes the poetic image the vehicle of epiphany. However, Carver's poetic image "wrenches us out of a quasi-naturalistic environment. The metaphor of the story does not accompany, elucidate a psychological, dramatic progression as in the realistic novel" (Arias-Misson:628). It is rather "a passage through [...] an unusual transcendence of the text", a kind of third voice heard in it (*ibid.*).

Moreover, attuning our ear to the voices of Paley, Beattie and Carver, we can see that not only there exists a rich variety of contemporary "realisms" in American fiction, but also that those voices are beginning to tell us quite new stories. In all three authors a symptomatic change—either thematic or stylistic or both—could recently be witnessed. In Paley's collection *Later the Same Day*, the unconditioned optimism of her earlier stories gives way to a more qualified assertion of the necessity of resistance in the face of despair. As politics overshadows these stories more than ever before, they also become more opinionated, more principled, more passionately committed to righteousness. The shrunk perspective of Beattie's *Distortions* seems to be replaced—in *The Burning House and Where You'll Find Me*—by more penetrating insights into the causes of her characters' behaviour, which is at the same time accompanied by the growing imagistic quality of her more recent stories. She is more willing now, as one critic observes, "to let metaphors grow from and give resonance to the train of associations on which her stories ride" (Porter 1985:25). In Carver's case, the change of which he himself often speaks, occurs with the publication of *Cathedral*. One can best see the nature of this change comparing two stories: *The Bath*, included in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, and *A Small Good Thing* from *Cathedral*, which are both different versions of the same basic anecdote, involving the parents' failure to collect a birthday cake for their son who dies on that day from a car accident. Alongside with the later version's greater optimism and less constricted vision, there appears a more

subtle analysis of the character motivation. Thus all three writers may be drifting away from narrowly-conceived "minimalism", and developing in new, interesting directions: toward a morally and ideologically charged vision in Paley; toward a wide-ranging critique of American middleclass life today in Beattie; and toward a firmer psychological grasp in Carver.

In the end, I want to suggest that the formulation of the title of this essay was intended so as to express of the double bond within minimalism, that is its strong affiliation with realism and—as "surfaces" and "disconnections" characterize the postmodern experience—its simultaneous affinity with postmodernism. Minimalism appears thus as internally divided, driven at the same time to representation and abstraction, to tradition and experiment. Maybe we should verify the common view of minimalism and instead of associating its emergence with the current decade and the eclipse of postmodernist fiction, we should realize that realism in its minimalist version has always been a latent possibility within American postmodernism, constituting a marginal voice before its coming to the full in the 1980s.

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REALIZM „POWIERZCHNI” I „NIECIĄGŁOŚCI”. O ODMIANACH AMERYKAŃSKIEJ PROZY MINIMALISTYCZNEJ

STRESZCZENIE

Na początku lat osiemdziesiątych w literaturze amerykańskiej następuje widoczny odwrót od powieści w stronę krótkich form narracyjnych, od estetyki postmodernistycznej ku zainteresowaniu realizmem. Dużą popularność zdobywa sobie tzw. proza minimalistyczna, uprawiana m.in. przez Ann Beattie, Raymonda Carvera czy – w pewnym ograniczonym stopniu – przez Grace Paley. Właśnie na materiale opowiadań tych pisarzy opiera się rozprawa, będąca próbą scharakteryzowania minimalizmu jako zjawiska artystycznego, uwikłanego w złożone relacje z dominującymi nurtami literackimi obecnych czasów. Omówione zostają takie cechy prozy minimalistycznej, jak fascynacja powierzchniowym szczegółem, świadoma prostota i fragmentaryczność, oszczędne operowanie metaforą, unikanie nadmiernej retoryki, ograniczenie opisów i akcji na rzecz zdecydowanej monologizacji lub dialogizacji tekstu, rezygnacja z bezpośredniej charakterystyki postaci, itp. Zwraca się uwagę na tematyczno-formalną konsekwencję w opowiadaniu minimalistycznym, zwłaszcza w podkreślaniu „nieciągłości” – w sensie egzystencjalnym i narracyjnym. Następnie rozważa się powiązania minimalizmu z bardziej tradycyjnym typem realizmu oraz z eksperymentalną falą postmodernizmu. Próbie weryfikacji poddane zostają powszechne poglądy, jakoby minimalizm należało traktować w kategoriach odradzania się nostalgii za prostotą literatury realistycznej i sprzeciwu wobec wybujałych form prozy postmodernistycznej. Wreszcie, w celu uniknięcia zbyt uogólnionego i jednostronnego naświetlenia, zwraca się uwagę na wewnętrzne różnice i zindywidualizowanie postaw twórczych w obrębie minimalizmu, co pozwala mówić raczej o wielości odmian prozy realistycznej we współczesnej literaturze amerykańskiej, niż o obecności jednego, ściśle scharakteryzowanego nurtu.