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Le visage changeant du minimalisme dans la littérature américaine

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The Changing Face of Minimalism in American Literature

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Introduction

It might not have attracted everyone's attention, but there is certainly a resurgent interest in what John Barth describes as the "two opposite roads to [literary] grace". "Maximalism" and "Minimalism" seem to witness a remarkable revival as evidenced by Nick Levey's *Maximalism in Contemporary American Literature* (2016) and Robert Clark's *American Literary Minimalism* (2014). Though the latter (mode) is more austere in appearance, and may lack the bountiful sway of its counterpart, similar scholarly interest is indicative of a dire need to re-explore both modes. The field of American studies is replete with maximalist—not always labelled as so—themes, forms and techniques whereas minimalism seems limited to a number of works and notions. This, however, does not demean its value or richness as a field for investigation. Hence, the present research devotes attention to the literary aesthetics of minimalism. Particularly, it highlights its manifestations in American literature. In fact, the study of minimalism from its inception in the 1920s with Hemingway's iceberg principle, to its rise—and relative fall—with the flash-fiction of dirty-realists and eventually its re-appearance in the twenty-first century novel, stimulates curiosity about its character and significance. Accordingly, the following sections, beginning from debates about its definition,

attempt to explore the various phases of American literary minimalism and the corresponding changes in its ways, means and ends.

1. The Geneses and Polemics of Literary Minimalism

Minimalism, as is well known, had its arms well-stretched into painting, sculpture and music by the 1960s. Its association with literature only gained currency by 1980s with the hectic publishing activity allotted to writers such as Raymond Carver, Frederick Barthelme, Ann Beattie, Bobbie Ann Mason and others. Their *via negativa* (negation path) is characterized by a will to minimize the form, subject and language of their works. By featuring middle-class (male) workers struggling with issues such familial relations and nonchalantly preoccupied with (the quotidian) manufactured goods, clutter, transports, junk food, television and so on, these works seem to hinge on ordinariness per se. Many observers have taken these elements as defining features of such fiction. This, however, may be latently myopic. Albeit that the fictional works of the above writers, with whom minimalism is mostly tied, do share these thematic concerns, they have different worldviews which manifest themselves differently. So, such literature cannot—and ought not be—pigeonholed into a one-sided definition. John Biguenet, for instance, takes the ostensible banality of minimalism at face value and concludes that minimalism is but “a disjunctive voice, an asocial self, a solipsist, a sentimentalist” (40). It may be admitted that—to some extent—minimalist fiction is too blank and bare-boned to suggest a solidified worldview, but such is as gross a judgement as that which casts all such literature as “nihilistic or morally neutral” (Clark, *Keeping* 107). If truth be told, nonetheless, defining minimalism has proved more troublesome and vexing than expected.

Let's begin in reverse order, from the least befitting to the least controversial. Madison Smartt Bell, in an essay entitled ‘Less is Less’ writes that minimalism is “a trim, minimal style, an obsessive concern

for surface detail, a tendency to ignore or eliminate distinctions among the people it renders, and a studiously deterministic, at times nihilistic, vision of the world” (Bell 65). Though it fairly takes into consideration stylistic and thematic attributes, such a view is only skin deep in its obsession with the surface details of minimalism. The indiscernibility of characters, for instance, rather than suggesting a world inhabited by an all-alike population, it allows characters to show their thoughts and feelings—not verbally but—through gestures and actions. Those people are “skeptical about language and its use” Frederick Barthelme explains, “while they don’t haul out their souls for flailing about on the page, they do have something of the full range of human intelligence and emotion, ...every choice is a way of demonstrating a grasp and an appreciation and an opinion of the world” (Quoted in Herzinger 16 -17). Hence, their apparent inarticulateness—besides being true and natural—diverts attention to other ways of expression. After all, words could hardly retain their rigour in a post-Vietnam traumatic atmosphere. It is a stifled and suppressed sort of communication.

Bill Buford, in his comments on Dirty Realism—one of the many labels given to minimalist works—summarizes the content of these ‘strange’ stories in terms of characters’ occupations, habits, troubles and even regions they come from. Such observations can be largely true about many of the eighties’ short stories, yet they do not define the minimalist enterprise as a whole. Kim Herzinger’s definition is less stigmatizing. In his introduction to an issue which the *Mississippi Review* devotes to minimalist writers, he refers to a “loosely characterized” movement reputed for “equanimity of surface, “ordinary” subjects, recalcitrant narrators and deadpan narratives, slightness of story, and characters who don’t think out loud” (Herzinger 7). His essay on minimalism’s connection to postmodernism is nevertheless quite insightful and can be very helpful in understanding the cultural conditions of what was called ‘a school’, ‘a doctrine’ and ‘a fad’. Barth’s definition reads as follows (without most parenthetical elements) : it “is the principle underlying the most impressive phenomenon on the current literary scene. I mean the new flowering of the American short story (in

particular the kind of terse, oblique, realistic or hyperrealistic, slightly plotted, extrospective, cool-surfaced fiction”.

Barth's few words about minimalism—though incomprehensive—aptly indicate an understanding of what lays at the core of the minimalist literary commitments. A massive inclination towards economy and ‘artistic austerity’ combined to stripping down superfluous detail informs the minimalist quest for the essential. An equally fair view is shared by Zoltan Abadinagy who believes that worlds constructed by such literature are “confined to the veristic, to the referential quotidian. The latter worlds can also be opaque and closed in upon, but for different reasons and in different ways” (138). In other words, a minimalist story aspires, first and foremost, to veracity of narrative yet, because of its elimination of many conventional story-elements such as omniscient narrators, complete plots, or the exposition of characters’ motives and consciousness, it tends—at times—to drift into fuzziness. Such mood, despite perplexing readers, is reflective of the story’s surrounding conditions. For all its glamour and excessive mobility, the later decades of the twentieth century were fraught with disillusionments, un-convictions, and confusion of perspectives. Though minimalism wittingly avoids intellectualism and moral controversies, it, like all movements of literature, could not but—unwittingly—reflect the political and social malaise of its own time. In a similar vein, W.M Verhoeven wonders, like many would do, whether such confusing (terminological) indecision is due to the fiction’s “bafflingly revolutionary, or incredibly reactionary” practice or else due to “the highly competitive [and overcrowded] critical market” (42). It is most probably both. Actually, one of the problems arising with whatever perspective one assumes as a basis for their definition—not that the very idea of definition is plausible anymore—is bound to empower one aspect at the expense of another. It is hard to maintain a definitional balance when the subject in question is versatile and multifaceted.

The ‘fad’ having relatively faded, by the turn of the twenty-first century, more effort was laid on the exploration of minimalism’s origins

and expansion. Cynthia Hallett in *Minimalism and the Short Story* (1999) credits Edgar Allan Poe, Anton Chekhov, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Ernest Hemingway as the cultivators of “the seeds of artifice” shared by minimalism and the short story. She explains their contribution as follows :

Poe’s notion of unity and singleness of effect ; Chekhov’s maxim that he must focus on the end of a short story and ‘artfully’ concentrate there an impression of total work ; Joyce’s minimal dependence on the traditional notion of plot, renouncing highly plotted stories in favor of seemingly static episodes and ‘slices’ of reality ; Beckett’s efforts ‘to present the ultimate distillation of his inimitable world-view ... to compress and edulcorate [purify] traditional genres’ (Hutchings 86) ; and Hemingway’s method of communicating complex emotional states by seemingly simple patterning of concrete detail... (Hallett 1999 : 12)

This suffices to understand the modernist roots of minimalism. Inspired by these various ‘conscious codes of omission’, minimalist writers developed a prose style that echoes simplicity, efficiency and a heightened sense of implication. Karen Alexander in her study of *Minimalism in Twentieth-Century American writing* (2001) similarly argues the impact of modernists such as Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams on the foundation of minimalist aesthetics. In fact their influence is both individually and collectively important. For Clark, these figures represent a broader linkage between minimalism and other modernist schools such as Imagism and Impressionism. Together they fostered a belief in the vitality of experience to the literary work. Uniqueness and condensation of affect coupled to a bracing sensory impression results in a literary work that is at once brief, focused, veristic and affective.

Many esteemed scholars are of the opinion that minimalism is closely connected to a postmodern system of thought. Art critic Kim Levin sees Minimalism as “the last of the modernist styles” and thus “a transition between the modern and the postmodern” (Levin 90). Irrespective of art history, in the field of literary studies, views about

the connection between the two revolve around two major questions : is minimalism part of a broader postmodernism ? Or is it an opposing movement ? Discussing a similar issue, Abadinagy, deduces, in close proximity to the views of Herzinger, Chrzanowska-Karpinska and Verhoeven, that “minimalism and postmodernism [are] like two eggs in the same basket” (130). He later points out the multiplicity of perspectives in regard to the dynamics of such relationship. He contends that “minimalism is a response to the same (i.e., postmodernist) view of the world, but the same philosophical conclusions regarding the postmodern nature of the world result in a radically different *ars poetica*” (129). In other words, both Maximalism and Minimalism—as contemporaneous literary currents—are triggered by the same (myriad of) epistemological and ontological apprehensions, yet their responses and modes of expression are different. Their substantial rejection of modernism’s totalizing worldview besides their disenchantment with language and ‘traditional’ modes of narrative is a common denominator between the two. However, one responds through a tense narrative reflecting the alienation and disturbances of its author, the other’s response is an offhand anecdotal tale about a blue-collar guy. While the fiction of postmodernists such as Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut, is more philosophical, dense, fragmented and too disillusioned with the chaos of material culture to sustain any solid attachment to everyday reality, minimalist fiction is less pretentious, straightforward, seemingly uncomplicated by ornament or metaphor and more—say—down-to-earth. “The seven fat years are succeeded by seven lean” Barth analogically declares.

Long story short, it might be more useful to think of minimalism as a literary current with intermittent resurgences and discontinuities rather than a homogeneous large-scale movement. The failing attempts to group and categorize all of the minimalist oeuvre under prescript-like definitions are an ample proof of its manifoldness. Minimalism borders on the cross-road between the prose poem, the short story, and polyphonic prose which indicates an impactful connection to other currents and practices (Warren 146 ; Clark, *Minimalism* 2). Such

polylythic diversity—thematic and stylistic—is in fact a token of its dual nature ; its roots extend deep into modernist traditions while it expands well through postmodernism. As will be shown subsequently, it might be even safe to say minimalisms. Accordingly, the evolution of minimalism, with its changing shapes and phases, is addressed in the remaining parts of the paper.

2. Minimalism : Trueness as a Mode of Writing

In his introduction to a special issue in the *American Book Review*, Jeffrey A. Sartain announces, “Minimalism is dead. Long live the minimalisms !” (3). This comes almost a quarter of a century after Bell and his peers gathered in a round-table discussion to “throw dirt on the grave of minimalism” (Bell et al. 42). This either means the two incidents do not refer to the same minimalism or else minimalism has an inherent ability to metamorphose and regenerate. Whatever the case, what can be undoubtedly attested is that the literature informed by minimalist principles is beyond nuanced. From Hemingway’s *In Our Time*, published 1924, to the collection of stories reviewed under Sartain’s editorship (2012) one may notice the sustenance of several literary allegiances and the divergence of certain others. For instance, as many scholars have aptly indicated, minimalism’s roots staunchly lead back to Hemingway’s fiction. He is considered as the forefather of American literary minimalism (Alexander 22 ; Bailey 15 ; Chénétier 220 ; Hollenberg 4). Yet, the next-generation literature—albeit to some extent modelled after his—exhibits a variation in scope and method. His fiction, hence, is but one of the recognizable faces of minimalism.

Hemingway’s tendency towards brief and simple narration might be the result of his early-career work as a journalist. It could be clearly noticed that his fiction, like objective news reporting, favours accurate declaration and description over emotive exposition. In “Hemingway’s Journalism and the Realist Dilemma”, Elizabeth Dewberry highlights

that both modes of writing are central to Hemingway's concept of reality and its (re)presentation through language. Particularly, she draws attention to some stories in *In Our Time* which are rewritings of some news articles that appeared in the *Toronto Star*. In doing so, the author demonstrates "his appreciation of the complex nature of all reality and all acts of storytelling as well as his perception of the fluidity of the boundaries between nonfiction and fiction and the concrete and imagined realities they represent" (Dewberry 28). Even when both modes seem to account for identical incidents, they in effect emphasize different aspects of the story. Hence, they create different 'realities'. The difference lies in the use of language and its manipulation to shape images and stimulate impressions. Another factor that contributed in fostering Hemingway's prose style is his enriching stay at Paris. From modernist poet Ezra Pound, he learnt to believe "in the mot juste—the one and only correct word to use— [he] taught me to distrust adjectives" (Hemingway, *Feast* 118). With such distrust of wordiness, he developed a style that hinges on cutting out ornament and sticking to simple declarative sentences. It, as well, avoids sentimentality and subjective denotation by keeping a stoic authorial withdrawal from the narration. For instance, in the second chapter of *In Our Time*, the narrator relates three bullfight scenes. The second is typically Hemingwayian in manner. It proceeds as follows :

The second matador slipped and the bull caught him through the belly and he hung on to the horn with one hand and held the other tight against the place, and the bull rammed him wham against the wall and the horn came out, and he lay in the sand, and then got up like crazy drunk and tried to slug the men carrying him away and yelled for his sword, but he fainted (Hemingway 1924 : 6)

The first and the last scenes are briefly put. So, (this) second one is relatively more detailed. It is important to note how the entire fight is related in a single sentence without disjunction or subordination. Though it often makes his prose seem monotone and thin-lipped,

coordination is preferred because it maintains a syntactical balance which gives the narration its neutral detached tone.

The narrator seldom employs any adjectives, adverbs or sentence intensifiers, instead he empirically comments on what he sees. In their trip back from Spain, Hemingway and Robert McAlmon, as William Carlos Williams writes in his *Autobiography*, found that “beside the track was a dead dog, his belly swollen, the skin of it iridescent with decay...he [Hem] got out his notebook and began, to Bob’s disgust, to take minute notes describing the carcass in all its beauty” (212). Williams thoroughly approves of this painstaking attention to nature and its doings. Regarding such empiricism, however, critic Wyndham Lewis totally disapproves. He considers Hemingway’s writing as “valueless” because “it is lifted out of Nature and very artfully and adroitly tumbled out upon the page : it is the brute material of everyday proletarian speech and feeling. The matière is cheap and coarse” (35). Such appraisal is no isolated stance since many would find that such fiction is simply superficial and brings no depth or insight to its readers. Such an outcome, however, appears nowhere in Hemingway’s conception of writing i.e. ‘the one true sentence’ (*Feast* 12). A writer, for Hemingway, need not seek to stir his readers towards empathy, disdain, or any kind of emotive response through a distortion of language. Misuse and overuse partake in such distortion. Reduction and omission hence are ways to maintain a veracious meaning. James Gifford explains, in an introduction to a reprinted 1924-version of *In Our Time*, that to ‘show not tell’ “requires an active form of reading in which the reader participates *in* and contributes *to* the texts rather than passively relying on narrative or self-explication” (ii). A writer’s task is to show the reader the tip of the iceberg. No overt exposition is needed. Hemingway contends : “if a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them” (*Afternoon*, 192). This writerly conviction, unsettling and equivocal as it might seem, is symptomatic of larger social and cultural conditions.

Both his fiction and nonfiction, in the aftermath of the WWI, reflect a will to denude and deflate language. In part because no verbosity warrants a rigorous communication of the war's realities and in part because it was that language of promise, justice and heroism which led many to their decimation. Minimalism, in this sense, is an abnegation of the abstract and the unsubstantial in favour of the concrete and the factual.

3. Minimalism : the Ordinary as a Revival of the Real

“There is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express” ; this—Beckett’s—oft-quoted statement may be the most comprehensive expression of the minimalist state and stance (103). Though said in 1949, it captures a sense of entanglement and loss-for-words that led many American writers to the minimalist short story by the 1980s. The prominence of such phenomenon over the American literary scene came as a logical outcome of certain historical, cultural and artistic conditions. It seems the time was finally ripe for such mode of writing to exercise its full potential, the foundations having already been laid down by Camus, Beckett, Hemingway and a few others.

A Vietnam trauma that is “literally and figuratively unspeakable” besides a general disgust with consumerism, wastefulness and mediatized fakeries are among the reasons for such literary angst to manifest itself unceremoniously when it did (Barth). Responding to the same disturbances as those fuelling the works of their maximalist counterparts, minimalist writers invested in the inexorable stylistic pluralism. An unflinching radicalism already begun with the sixties’ marginalities and extremes coming to the foreground, thus, the way was paved for nonconformities to be exhibited in art galleries as in pubs. Minimalism, by espousing a colloquial low-brow culture, positions itself as an adversary to the (elitist) high-brow verbiage of

postmodernists. In William Burroughs' words, it is fully conscious that "the world cannot be expressed, it can perhaps be indicated by mosaics of juxtapositions, like objects abandoned in a hotel room, defined by negatives and absences (Quotes in Woods 51). That is why the short stories making up this phenomenon are so imbued with elements of popular culture, everyday statements, casual incidents, lay characters and ordinary stuff.

Margaret Doherty's article "State-Funded Fiction : Minimalism, National Memory, and the Return to Realism in the Post-Postmodern Age" is of particular interest as it highlights an often-neglected aspect—namely the socio-political—in studies of minimalist literature and its context. The article draws attention to the role played by the National Endowment for the Arts in the promotion and funding of minimalist writers. The latter, as shown by the NEA records of Creative Writing Fellows, have been awarded a number of grants : Barthelme (1979), Carver (1980), Ford (1980, 1986), Mason (1983), and Wolff (1985). Doherty suggests that such institutional support has remained invisible because it was in NEA's interest "to avoid even the slightest basis for a comparison with the censorious and propagandistic Soviet Union" while "encouraging fiction that combined ... 'popular appeal' with aesthetic merit" ; consequently, it escaped "being defunded" by supporting a literature that is relevant to American life (Doherty 80-81). In a nutshell, several factors gathered to make minimalist literature appear and take—briefly—over the American literary scene by the 1980s. It is at once a fiction that resonates (though it does not state) psychological malaise, socio-cultural shifts, as well as political and aesthetic orientations.

Marc Chénétier, in his 1998 book *Beyond Suspicion : New American Fiction Since 1960*, notes how minimalist fiction "interrupted" several decades of representing quotidian life "as an ambiguous artefact, as the moving and enigmatic flux of information ... whose meaning was suspect or uncertain, [and] pushed to the edge of the unknowable" so as to introduce back "the images and noises of the everyday, the ordinary" (216-218). By committing itself to verisimilitude as a method of

representing life, minimalist fiction—almost abhorrently—replicates quotidian episodes. Carver's *Cathedral*, Jayne Phillips' *Black Tickets*, or Barthelme's *Moon Deluxe* are stories where nothing significant—or more accurately nothing clearly signified—seems to occur. They mostly sound like inconsequential talk said to a stranger with no wish for reply or *revoir*. Buford's characterization of these stories offers a close(d) description of minimalism's thematics though it does not elucidate that those are momentary rather than inherent concerns. Those are “unadorned, unfurnished, low-rent tragedies” he says, “about people who watch day-time television, read cheap romances or listen to country and western music. They are waitresses in roadside cafes, cashiers in supermarkets, construction workers, secretaries and unemployed cowboys” (4). As per their dilemmas, a short list may include : drunkard-ness, divorce, adversity, loneliness, emotional bereft, etc. Because most works published during the period revolve around such commonplace issues, many tend to regard the mode as trivial, banal and unproductive. That might be a misunderstanding and indiscrimination between simple and simplistic, complex and complicated.

Under the flat—sometimes boring—story there lays a genuine concern to depict events, characters and human attitudes in the same way as they appear in real life. (Typical of the Reagan era), these writers “are little concerned with causes, are loathe to comment, and present the real as it reaches them with certain passivity” (Chénétier 222). Reading a minimalist story, thus, is no different from facing a real life experience. People do not pour their hearts out for others' convenience (or understanding), events do not unfold linearly in a logical sequence ; they instead appear disrupted and illogical. So, in a way, reading a work where details about characters' inner psyches are missing and reasons behind their actions are unexplained is a work which resembles a laborious exploring of a landscape whose simply-sketched map made it seem effortless. Furthermore, the preoccupation with day-to-day matters reveals the minimalists' attempt to underscore that essential part of life which got drowned in material excess and

verbal abstraction. Allegory, metaphor and other rhetorical devices seem—according to them—to obscure rather than elucidate meaning. That is why, the ‘realism’ tag is clustered with ‘neo’, ‘pop’, ‘extra’, ‘hyper’, ‘k-mart’ and ‘wised-up’ in the hope of finding a term that denotes—and distinguishes—such uncluttered mundane fiction from other akin literary endeavours. In this regard, critic Warren Motte, in *Small Worlds*, explains :

Simple things are free from complexity, devoid of intricacy or ruse, unembellished, unaffected, plain ... Simple things are apparently *artless*, and indeed the accusation of artistic vacuity is one of the dangers that awaits any minimalist undertaking. It is important to understand, however, that the minimalist aesthetic does not valorize vacuity as such. Rather, vacuity is the surface effect of a deliberate process of eschewal and restriction intended to clear away conventional rhetoric in an attempt to approximate the *essential* (Motte 1999 : 4)

However, a superficial judgment or accusation of minimalist literature as overly simplistic cannot be considered as the reviewers’ entire fault. After all, with its ostensible crudeness minimalism is so salivating a temptation for pseudo-writers to ignore. Moreover, its aesthetic impulse towards omissions and absences, to suggest and imply outer realms while simultaneously keeping a fastidious grip to ordinary small worlds, is paradoxical and befuddling. In such case, critical assaults are unavoidable. Scathing criticism on emerging (unorthodox) types of fiction is a leitmotif in literary history. Hence, it ought not to hinder (re)evaluations, all the more so if the literature is “never unified enough in subject or approach to be called a stable genre” which suggests a promise for adaptation and innovation (Sartain 2012 : 3).

4. Minimalism : the Poetics of Genuine Simplicity

That the crux of minimalism is, by and large, represented in the flowering of the short story is beyond dispute. Because of its extreme reductiveness and refusal to involve more than the outward facades of life, many conceive(d) it as a barren short-lived literature. In fact, even those eminent writers whose work is predominantly associated with minimalism are not lifelong minimalists. However, such literature and mode of writing survived the test of time. It not only endured to the twenty-first century but also prospered aesthetically and generically.

Among the very few who could foresee the inherent potential of minimalism to (re)generate in a variety of contexts and molds is critic Herzinger. He asserts that “far from reducing the possibilities of fiction, the ‘minimalists’ may well be renewing and extending them ... they may well be creating literary constructs as formally rigorous and linguistically savvy as their Postmodern predecessors” (20). Like ‘a world in a grain of sand’, such literature minimizes material and scale in order to open up opportunities of exploration elsewhere. Its very name may initially suggest smallness or limitation of vision, yet some of the finest works, which lack none of the complexity and impressiveness esteemed among critics and readers, are decidedly minimalist.

As demonstrated earlier, American minimalism developed in parallel with the short story ; nevertheless, its fate was not entirely bound to the latter. Formal leanness seemed prerequisite to reduction and omission. Minimalist techniques hence were considered most suited to the genre of the short story and their effect more striking in prosaic forms than poetry (though there are several important minimalist poems extremely exemplified in Russian poet Vasilisk Gnedov’s wordless ‘poem’ or Aram Saroyan’s single-letter ‘poem’). However, when minimalism re-appeared, after a brief eclipse during the 1990s, such twinning—between short form and minimalism—

was gone. For instance, Justin Sirois's *Falcons on the Floor*, Tao Lin's *Shoplifting from American Apparel*, Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* exemplify a wide range of genres, forms and contents in which minimalism may be seeded with booming prospects. Ranging from an Iraq war novel, to an autobiographical novella, a trans-generational family saga, and a post-apocalyptic tale, these works illustrate a variety of themes as well. What relates them to minimalism is the shrewdness, sharpness and genuineness of their prose. Despite the fact that they are not so short or terse, they still figure as minimalist. After all, "not everything small or simple qualifies ipso facto as minimalist", so there is no reason to disqualify what is not-small as non-minimalist (Wanner 4). The simplicity of such works is cutting edge. As a residual, it expands the minimalist tradition that begun with Hemingway reductivism and the extreme will of minimalist artists and writers to create "an honest, direct, unadulterated experience in art, (any art), minus symbolism, minus messages, and minus personal exhibitionism" (Goossen 169). Consequently, this phase represents a coming back from the extreme (avant-garde) of the 80s towards a moderate, less restrictive and more liable-to-adapt minimalism.

A good case in point is that of Cormac McCarthy who is one of the most revered figures in contemporary American literature. His late fiction is considered minimalist. After his success in westerns, *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy, he moved to another territory. With *No Country for Old Men* (2005), he turns to a crime thriller allowing punctuation to begin diminishing from the page. When later asked (by Oprah Winfrey) about such choice, he replies "there's no reason to block the page up with weird little marks. If you write properly, you shouldn't have to punctuate ... Punctuation is important. It's important to punctuate so that it makes it easy for people to read. It's to make it easier, not to make it harder" ("interview"). In that sense writing properly entails the preclusion of all that distracts readers' attention away from the essence of the writing. 'Weird little marks' ought to be employed sparingly or to "an absolute minimum".

He, like Hemingway, believes in “simple declarative sentences ... in periods and capitals and the occasional comma, and that’s it”. This punctuation eschewal has become McCarthy’s hallmark. His style, however, is as refined and profound as ever.

The Road, for instance, depicts an ashy, cold and lifeless world. Conversation between father and son is very scarce and hardly exceeds few brief statements. Narration as well is somewhat unconcerned with their inner thoughts or psychological depths ; it instead focuses on food, landscape, the weather, etc. Both language and world are stripped down to a minimum enough for survival only. However, there are many (descriptive) passages where the narrator demonstrates an acute attention to nature and its details. For example, in the opening passage, the father wakes up at night recalling a dream. They “like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast. Deep stone flues where the water dripped and sang. Tolling in the silence the minutes of the earth and the hours and the days of it and the years without cease” (4). Upon walking to “ a great stone room where lay a black and ancient lake”, they see “ on the far shore a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders” (4). The creature “swung its head low over the water as if to take the scent of what it could not see. Crouching there pale and naked and translucent, its alabaster bones cast up in shadow on the rocks behind it. Its bowels, its beating heart. The brain that pulsed in a dull glass bell” (4). Then, it “swung its head from side to side and then gave out a low moan and turned and lurched away and loped soundlessly into the dark” (4). The lengthy description is so poetic and almost lyrical in its flow of adjectives and adverbs. Though it is an uncommon tendency in minimalism, this vividly creates a concentrated image with all the sensory elements needed to engrave a strong impression in the reader. As, both Clark and Bailey contend, such innovative poeticism “borrows from and adds to the minimalist framework” (Bailey 36). Indeed, McCarthy’s later style combines a departure from traditional modes of writing that is highlighted through his use of punctuation

and a departure from constraining minimalist tendencies. He thus merges both absences to construct a condensed narrative that reflects, burrowing Beckett's words, "the common anxiety to express as much as possible, or as truly as possible, or as finely as possible, to the best of one's ability" (103). In fact, literary minimalism is not about how little or much is expressed, rather it is all about how essential and true is the expression.

Conclusion

In short, notwithstanding the polemical debate over minimalism, its definition and historicity, it is crucial to see the diversity of minimalist literature. The latter strongly suggests an evolving and acclimatizing nature of minimalist principles. The different phases and faces of minimalism in American literature reflect such predominant inclinations. The early fiction and critical works of writers such as Hemingway endorse a will to remove what is unnecessary in order to sustain a simple and true representation of reality. The rising momentum of such minimalism reached zenith by the later decades of the twentieth century when social, cultural and historical conditions helped foster a sense of unease towards 'surplusage'. Such fiction thrives on domesticity and ordinariness as a way to address reality. By the twenty-first century, those extreme tendencies towards reduction and sparseness softened a bit. Hence, the face of contemporary minimalist fiction is less laconic and—relatively—more abundant in its range of themes and forms. Indeed, nothing is more unifying to this diverse tradition than its core belief in the beauty and profundity of simple texts.

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Résumé

Cet article examine l'histoire du Minimalisme dans la littérature Américaine. En particulier, il se concentre sur ses principes durables qui permettent aux lecteurs de l'identifier même dans des contextes (culturel, social et historique) extrêmement différents. En tant que phénomène littéraire, le Minimalisme a commencé avec les nouvelles d'Hemingway (1920s), mais il est devenu plus populaire avec l'hyper-réalisme dans les œuvres de Carver, Barthelme et Wolff (1980s). Finalement, il a réapparu notamment dans les récits contemporains de Cormac McCarthy (2000s). En suivant cette évolution littéraire, l'objectif est de mettre en évidence la diversité et la richesse de ce mode d'écriture et de souligner le besoin d'une exploration plus poussée et d'une évaluation critique renouvelée.

Mots-clés

Histoire littéraire ; Minimalisme ; Néo-réalisme ; Postmodernisme ; Style.

Abstract

Recent scholarship on literary minimalism reflects a renewed interest in a mode of writing which many (prematurely) declared as bygone. Although such a literary legacy began, in earnest, with the short stories of Hemingway, it is mostly tied to the 1980s short fiction. Its current resurgence in some contemporary works indicates a yet-unexplored diversity and expansiveness underlying the ostensible terseness and incompleteness of minimalist texts. Hence, the present essay revisits a century-long tradition in order to explore its tides and ebbs. Particularly, it highlights how minimalist tendencies are adapted in different contexts (historical, social and cultural) for different aesthetic purposes. Veracity, trueness and simplicity are the enduring principles through which minimalism's changing face remains recognizable.

Keywords

Literary History ; Minimalism ; Neo-realism ; Postmodernism ; Style.

الملخص

يهتم هذا المقال بتاريخ ما يعرف بالادنوية في الأدب الأمريكي. يركز البحث تحديدا على المبادئ الراسخة لهذا الاسلوب الانشائي و التي تسمح للقراء بالتعرف عليها في سياقات و اطر مختلفة. بدأت هذه الظاهرة الأدبية مع القصص القصيرة لهمنغواي (1920) ، لكنها أصبحت أكثر شيوعاً مع رواج "الواقعية المفرطة" في اعمال كارفر، برثيلم و ولف (1980) . مؤخرا ، عادت معالم الادنوية إلى الظهور بشكل ملفت في الروايات المعاصرة لكورمك مكارثي (2000). إن الهدف من خلال تتبع هذه التطورات هو تسليط الضوء على تنوع و ثراء هذا الاسلوب الكتابي والتشديد على الحاجة إلى مزيد من الدراسة والتقييم النقدي المتجدد.

الكلمات المفتاحية

لتاريخ الادبي ; الادنوية ; الواقعية الجديدة ; ما بعد الحداثة ; الاسلوب.