REALISM AND NARRATORS IN
TOBIAS WOLFF’S SHORT STORIES

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Literary minimalism is considered a critical realist reaction to the excesses of postmodernism. It began in the United States in the Eighties and received critical sanction with the 1983 *Granta* issue in which some of the minimalist authors were published and which enjoyed a wide array of critical response.¹ In both positive and negative ways, minimalism has been associated with a smallness of vision and smallness of execution² and with the “reflection of the fragmentary and alienated condition of the twentieth-century self”. It focuses on defining a small literary world.³

Minimalism was a reaction against postmodernism, since after the postmodernist trend a return to nineteenth-century realism was inconceivable. As Stefan Colibaba, one of the most important scholars in the field, points out, “The Minimalists grew up in a world that already had a postmodern sensibility”.⁴ They never regarded literature as a mere recount of contemporary life. They moved away from postmodernism because of their contrasting sensibility and understanding of life.⁵ However, the imprint of postmodernism cannot be totally eliminated. Ann-Marie Karlsson describes minimalism as a subversion of representational realism, a point on which most critics

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⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.
agree. Her starting point is Frederick Barthelme’s article “On Being Wrong: Convicted Minimalist Spills Bean”, published in the New York Times Book Review. She observes that minimalist realism suggests the “film-like quality of this fiction”. For Karlsson, “its extreme verisimilitude creates an ‘over-realism’”. Minimalism is hyper-realistic because of form, content and ideology. The shift from “traditional” realism makes minimalism “partly an experimental avant-garde fiction, which is attempting to find new means of expression beyond traditional realism and postmodern fiction”. Critics generally assume that minimalism is a development of postmodernist fiction and that minimalist writers have acquired postmodernist techniques and have been affected by the postmodern frame of mind.

The minimalist writers’ attack on realism has fostered a fiction that presents affinities with hyperrealism or the grotesque and the uncanny. Their assault subverts representational realism without losing sight of verisimilitude. As W.M. Verhoeven argues, minimalism’s gimmicks are not “a wilful departure from formal realism and mimetic rendition of truth, but rather an act of discovery – discovery, that is, in the process of composing their stories”.

At present there is not a large body of critical writings on late twentieth-century realism. The aim of this essay is to help to fill the void in this field of study. Although I am well aware that this investigation has to be limited in scope and constitutes only a preliminary approach to the much broader research of minimalism, the purpose of this essay is to explore the nature of realism in late twentieth-century American short stories. Centering on three short stories – “The Night in Question”, “Sanity” and “The Other Miller” from The Night in Question – this essay focuses on the role of the narrators in Tobias Wolff’s short stories and on his use of narrative

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7 Ibid., 153.