Many commentators still tend to focus on the minimalist context within which Raymond Carver writes rather than on the writing itself. Although such an approach might be useful for historicizing Carver’s work, it does not provide a useful heuristic with which to understand how his individual texts generate their peculiar literary power. Because his prose eschews metaphor and his narratives resist closure, his stories are difficult for some readers to understand. Nonetheless, if we are to appreciate them fully, then we must understand how the particular literary techniques that he uses generate their meaning. In what follows, I will focus on the poetics of a single story, “Vitamins,” from Where I’m Calling From, both because its laconic prose and anomic characters are representative of much of Carver’s fiction, and because it has drawn little attention from critics.

Michael Gorra’s essay “Laughter and Bloodshed” is representative of the critical light through which Carver is often considered. Gorra views Carver as the leading practitioner of minimalism, which Gorra characterizes as

a mannerist mode in which the intentional poverty, the anorexia, of the writer’s style is mimetic of the spiritual poverty of his/her characters’ lives, their disconnection from anything like a traditional community. It is a prose so attenuated that it cannot support the weight of a past or future. (155)

To be sure, Carver’s characters are often inarticulate and directionless as well as profoundly
 disconnected from their community. I suggest, however, that it is the characters themselves who are limited by this disconnectedness; it is not the paucity of the author’s style that limits them.¹

Similarly, contrary to Gorra’s disparaging claim that Carver’s prose “cannot support the weight of a past or a future,” I suggest that this is a strength, not a weakness, of his style. Many of the characters who populate Carver’s fictional universe have little or no notion of a continued existence. They occupy disparate states of consciousness; they are, so to speak, concatenations of unconnected states of mind. Often, they have been cut off from their pasts through abuse of drugs and alcohol, and they have no vision of a future because they are benumbed by their own sense of hopelessness. The epigraph for Where I’m Calling From, a collection of Carver’s short stories, selected and chronologically arranged by the author, is a quotation from The Unbearable Lightness of Being, by Milan Kundera: “We can never know what to want, because, living only one life, we can neither compare it with our previous lives nor perfect it in our lives to come” (8). It serves as an apt description of the hyper-temporality in which Carver’s characters live; they live so much in the particular that the time in which an event occurs seems to be an essential characteristic of it. Carver’s prose is sufficiently rich to represent the minimal slice of time of which his characters are aware.

One may explain in similar fashion the absence of metaphor in Carver’s prose. As Kirk Nesset contends, “in this perilously unstable world of Carver’s survivors, extended metaphor implies a kind of stability, a tangible unity of vision and awareness, that if applied too deliberately would come off as worse than inaccurate: it would be false”(47). Although Carver’s eschewal of metaphor is in keeping with his characters’ minimal awareness of possibilities, such eschewal does not lend itself to ease of interpretation. Without the convenient handle that metaphor provides, it is difficult to know how to make sense of many of Carver’s stories.
1.

“Vitamins” is a story to which scant attention is given. Some critics, such as Nesset, either neglect or dismiss it altogether; others simply refer to it in passing. Adam Meyer mentions it merely as “one of the more despairing works in the volume” (134). Still others just discuss its plot, then cull from it a broad, sweeping, statement of theme. For instance, Arthur Salzman summarizes its plot briefly before proclaiming, “[f]rom aimless anger, to furtiveness, to apathy and resignation—so runs the course of private ruin” (136), a statement that is of no help in elucidating the story. Randolph Paul Runyon, whose reading of “Vitamins” is one of two extensive readings of the story I have found, interprets it primarily as a dream-like rendering of “A Small Good Thing,” the story that precedes it in Cathedral, the volume in which the story originally appears. The other extensive reading is Vasiliki Fachard’s, and she is the only critic who focuses deeply on the stylistic features of the work.

In “Vitamins,” Carver employs repetition to a hyperbolic degree. The story is divided into nine sections of varying length, indicated at least as much by the larger than usual blank space between certain paragraphs as they are by a scene change. He mentions body parts in excess of ninety-five times, approximately five times per page. In section one, there are only three mentions of breast, hand, and eye, but in section two, there are twenty-four mentions of feet, eyes, legs, hand, head, brain, finger, face, hair, and wrist (in order of mention). The word girl(s) is repeated sixteen times, ten of which occur in the first two paragraphs. Sections three, four, and five are some of the briefest in the story, with five, eight, and seven mentions of body parts occurring respectively, and with back, skin, waist, and shoulder being added to the catalogue. The relative paucity of mention in these sections is supplemented by other patterns of
word repetition. In section four, the word vitamins is mentioned fifteen times and the word dream, thirteen times. Section six is the longest section in the story, and added to the litany of body parts are arms, lids, mouth, ass, lips, nipples, ear, and various sobriquets for male genitalia, including pud, hammer, dick, and one for female genitalia, sweets. In section seven, the word ear(s) is repeated eight times in thirteen sentences. In section eight, the words chin and heart are mentioned, in addition to the name Portland, which, in addition to its previous three mentions, is mentioned seven times in six sentences. Section nine adds teeth.

That this pattern of lexical repetition is never alluded to by critics is incomprehensible. Such dramatic use of this device reveals it to be, in Roman Jakobson’s terms, “the dominant,” the primary element through which we can decode the text. Jakobson identifies the dominant as “the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure” (41). Each work of art has its own dominant, and it is this component that not only provides structure to that work but also provides the framework through which we are compelled, or determined, to understand it. I contend, then, that the dominant in “Vitamins” is lexical repetition, the plethora of which provides an interpretive framework for my understanding of the story.

Before I proceed to decode the text and, in the process, to lay bare its comprehensive structuring principle, I proffer a brief summary of “Vitamins.” The narrator and his lover, Patti, live together. He works nights as a janitor in a hospital while she works selling vitamins door to door. One of the women with whom she works, Sheila, makes a pass at Patti and is rebuffed. The narrator and Patti have a party and invite the women. At the party, everybody gets drunk. Sheila passes out, breaking her finger in the process. Upon her awakening, the narrator, who is angered over Sheila’s having made a pass at Patti, has an argument with her. She storms out of
the house. He tells Patti that Sheila has gone to Portland. Also during the party, the narrator makes a pass at Donna, the other core member of the group.

Later in the week, the narrator and Patti have an argument over the sorry state of the vitamin business, after which the narrator leaves for work. After he is done with work, Donna appears in the hospital parking lot. The narrator and she go to a bar for a drink. At the bar they are joined by Benny, an acquaintance of the narrator, and Benny’s friend, Nelson, a deranged veteran, who has just recently returned from Vietnam. He talks trash for a while, and then pulls out an ear he cut off of a Vietnamese soldier. The narrator and Donna get up to leave; this agitates Nelson, who verbally assaults the couple. The couple returns to their cars, at which time Donna, upset, announces that she is quitting her job and thinking of moving to Portland. The couple part from each other. The narrator goes home to find Patti having a bad dream. He pours himself a drink and gropes for an aspirin in the medicine chest.

The extreme syntactic parallelism of the opening paragraph creates a distance between the two characters:

I had a job and Patti didn’t. I worked a few hours a night for the hospital. It was a nothing job. I did some work, signed the card for eight hours, went drinking with the nurses. After a while, Patti wanted a job. She said she needed a job for her self-respect. So, she started selling multiple vitamins door to door. (245)

The opening line introduces a conjunction, whose conjuncts I and Patti, are separated by and, a word which mainly connotes togetherness, yet one which Carver here uses to indicate apartness. Three sentences follow in which the narrator describes both his job and his own core group of girls, the nurses. The reference to this core group literally separates the narrator's I from Patti,
after which follow three sentences describing Patti’s desire, need for, and attainment of a job.

The next several pages are rife with lexical repetition. For the most part, these repetitions are sequential: on the first two pages, in which the narrator describes the girls who sell vitamins with Patti, the word girl(s) appears sixteen times; on the next two pages, in which the narrator discusses both Patti’s and his own relationship with the girls who comprise the core group, the names of body parts appear twenty-four times. Although repetition usually serves to tightly bind together a narrative, here the effect of lexical repetition is to dislocate the reader. The repeated use of the third person, she, in the opening section, serves to iterate this effect.

About the transient nature of the vitamin business, the narrator comments:

Sometimes a girl just disappeared in the field, sample case and all. She’d hitch a ride into town, then beat it. But there were always girls to take her place. Girls were coming and going in those days. Patti had a list. Every few weeks she’d run a little ad in The Pennysaver. There’d be more girls and more training. There was no end of girls. (246)

By so objectifying the group of women who work for Patti, the narrator prepares the reader for the even greater objectification of its individual members. In addition, the numerous mentions of the word girl(s), while mimetic of their apparent replication, numb the reader to any possible difference among them. This distancing effect is also manifest in the passage in which the narrator describes Sheila, who having just awakened from passing out, discovers that she hurt her finger:5

And she was sure her finger was broken. She showed it to me. It looked purple.
She bitched about us letting her sleep all night with her contacts in. She wanted to know didn’t anybody give a shit. She brought the finger up close and looked at it.
She shook her head. She held the finger as far away as she could and looked some more. It was as if she couldn’t believe the things that had happened to her that night. Her face was puffy, and her hair was all over. She ran cold water on her finger. (247)

Here not only does the narrator objectify Sheila by repeatedly referring to her as she and employing anaphora to do so, but he also objectifies her finger by using the definite article twice in referring to it. Thus, his use of she iterates the distance between Sheila and himself, and his use of the signals distance between Sheila and her own body parts. Both instances of lexical repetition serve to keep things apart.

The fourth section of the story begins with a conversation the narrator has with Patti a few weeks after the party, in which the words vitamins, mentioned fifteen times, and dream(s), thirteen times, are juxtaposed repeatedly. Patti is constantly dreaming about vitamins:

“[e]verybody dreams,” (251) she tells the narrator.

If you didn’t dream, you’d go crazy. I read about it. It’s an outlet. People dream when they’re asleep. Or else they’d go nuts. But when I dream, I dream about vitamins. Do you see what I’m saying? (251)

The narrator doesn’t see, and he responds by expressing doubt whether he dreams at all. He does not see why the continuity between her waking and her dream life is so distressing to her. On the other hand, what Patti does not see is that her dreams about vitamins might very well provide her “an outlet,” for in dreaming about vitamins, she is, of course, dreaming about a product that presumably restores health, and in this sense, Patti’s dream is displacing her wish for psychological health. Patti lacks the ability to interpret her dreams; hence, she lacks their potential restorative qualities. The narrator,
however, lacks the dreams themselves.

Our discourse on dreams is completely over-determined by Sigmund Freud, so, it is difficult to imagine reading the dialogue between Patti and the narrator, the only extended conversation in which they engage, without thinking of Freud’s analysis of dreams. David Lodge proffers a lucid account of the processes of condensation and displacement, the Freudian concepts upon which Roman Jakobson relies to make a distinction between the two poles of metaphor and metonymy:

These are the basic processes by which the latent content of the dream—the real anxieties or desires which motivate it—is translated into its manifest content, the dream itself. Condensation is the process by which the latent content of the dream is highly compressed, so that one item stands for many different dream thoughts, and displacement is the process by which dreams are often centred from the anxieties or guilts which trigger them off. Thus, something trivial in a dream may have the significance of something important in actuality and the connection between the two can be traced along a line of contiguities by the technique of free association. (79)

If I substitute the words *prose narrative* for *dream* in this passage,\(^6\) then I can claim that by extension, Freud’s distinction provides another key for decoding “Vitamins.” Indeed, the conversation between Patti and the narrator operates as a kind of meta-discursive metonymy for their conversations, and stands by association, for Freudian discourse about dreams, and this discourse, in turn, points to ways in which subtexts bear upon one’s interpretation of the text. Before I suggest how one such subordinate code might work in “Vitamins,” I will continue my
linear analysis of the dominant patterns of repetition.

The fifth section is a brief description of the setting of the second half of the story, a bar called *Off-Broadway*, to which the narrator and Donna come on their date. The narrator depicts the bar metonymically, in terms of the regulars who frequent it, and he also depicts these regulars metonymically, in terms of a racial epithet: “it was a spade place in a spade neighborhood. It was run by a spade named Khaki” (252-3). The weaving of lexical repetition has now become far less subtle than it had been earlier; whereas the lexical repetition found earlier in the narrative is separated by clauses, or even by sentences, these repetends are separated only by intervening words. This suggests a greater restlessness on the narrator’s part, perhaps because he is about to relate the details of his date.

Toward the beginning of the longest, most complex section of the narrative, appears a pair of passages, both of which employ the figure of *epizeuxis*, “repetition with no words intervening” (“Epizeuxis”). As Donna and the narrator drive to the *Off-Broadway*, she relates her reasons for wanting out of the vitamin business: “She started right in about vitamins. Vitamins were on the skids, vitamins had taken a nose dive. The bottom had fallen out of the vitamin market” (254). The narrator responds to Donna’s dissatisfaction: “I said, ‘You’re not thinking of going to Portland, are you?’ We were on the sidewalk. I put my arm around her waist. ‘I don’t know anything about Portland. Portland hasn’t crossed my mind once’” (255). No longer is there even any lexical intervention between these repetends, the figurative clash of words here foreshadows the clash of desires that follows. Upon hearing Donna’s lament, the narrator assumes that Donna, like Sheila, will go to Portland, for Portland holds out the possibility of safe harbor for the women in this story. The possibility of a life in Portland stands in marked antithesis to a diminished life selling vitamins. Thus far, it is a possibility Donna has not
entertained.

Once in the bar, the couple’s lovemaking is interrupted when an acquaintance of the narrator, Benny, and his friend, Nelson, join them in their booth. Nelson begins to taunt the couple about their infidelity. Benny, trying to change the subject, urges Nelson to show the trophy ear he has brought back from Vietnam. He yanks from his pocket a key chain with a human ear dangling from its end. The narrator and Donna are repulsed. The scene ends shortly after Khaki, the bar’s owner drops by the booth:

He took up the chain and dangled the ear in front of his face. He looked at it. He let it swing back and forth on the chain. “I heard about these dried-up ears and dicks and such.” (260)

Several critics attribute symbolic significance to the ear. Kirk Nesset sees it as a symbol of people’s unwillingness to listen or to hear other people: “[i]n ‘Vitamins,’ a . . . more general deafness finds its emblem in the form of a dismembered, dried-out human ear”(64). That the word ear is repeated so often, even insisted upon, lends much credence to this interpretation. Vasiliki Fachard, too, regards the ear as symbol of deafness; however, for her the ear is not emblematic of a general deafness, but symbolic of the narrator’s specific incapacity to connect with others: “[i]t was above all that disconnection from others in her partner that Nelson wished to warn Donna about when he first showed her the ear . . .”(110). Furthermore, in emphasizing the sexual implications of Khaki’s remarks, Fachard argues persuasively that only by forging a truly intimate connection with Donna, “can the narrator’s sexuality ward off the menace of the withering like the dead soldier’s ear. For as Benny [sic] intimated when he associated ‘dried-up ears and dicks and such,’ both functions are connected” (110).

To be sure, the ear is a symbol: for Nelson, it is symbolic of the war he had fought or is
still fighting; it is a piece of that war which stands for the whole of it, but it is a piece which no longer has any relation with that to which it had been attached. Like Sheila’s broken finger, Nelson’s ear is foremost a symbol of disjointedness. Still, however symbolic it might be, the ear is but one repetend within a larger framework of repetition, and as such, it functions as another body part in a series of body parts.

After the disturbing scene in the bar, the narrator has lost interest in Donna, and she takes what happened as a sign for her to leave town: “There must be something in Portland. Portland’s on everybody’s mind these days. Portland’s a drawing card. Portland this, Portland that. Portland’s as good a place as any. It’s all the same” (262). Each of the female characters in the story experiences a fall of some kind to which she responds with horror. Each of these moments leads to another small, but significant moment of realization or resolution: Patti, horrified to discover that hawking vitamins is on her mind even after she has fallen asleep, comes to realize the extent to which she is stultified. Both Sheila, horrified at having fallen down and broken her finger, and Donna, horrified at the circumstances in which she finds herself once the bottom has fallen out of the vitamin business, resolve to go to Portland. The narrator, too, experiences a fall of sorts, but his fall does not end in similar resolve.

After leaving Donna, the narrator returns home to discover Patti sleepwalking in the middle of a nightmare. The story closes on an epiphanic, albeit enigmatic, note:

I couldn't take any more tonight. “Go back to sleep, honey. I’m looking for something,” I said. I knocked some stuff out of the medicine chest. Things rolled into the sink. “Where’s the aspirin?” I said. I knocked down some more things. I didn’t care. Things kept falling. (263)
The narrator experiences things falling, yet neither an articulated realization nor a resolution follows from this experience. The pronouncement, *Things kept falling*, has the weight of an epiphany, and given the series of epiphanic moments that precede it, surely, it is reasonable to read it as one; however, it is difficult to know how to interpret it. Gunther Leypoldt identifies in Carver’s work a type of epiphany he calls an “arrested epiphany,” one he distinguishes from *anagnorisis*, the more standard type of epiphany; the “arrested epiphany” is defined by “a distinct disparity between the character’s feeling of revelation and his or her lack of understanding what sort of insight the revelation is supposed to provide” (5). Although the point at which Carver ends his story necessitates that the narrator’s realization remain unarticulated, we can reasonably assume from the narrator’s lack of self-knowledge that it will remain so.

Furthermore, Leypoldt’s analysis of the structural significance of the epiphanic moment in Carver’s fiction brilliantly captures the interpretive crux readers experience at the end of “Vitamins”:

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 . . . 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. (6)
Fortunately, the plethora of repetition and the rich, although not yet fully articulated, narrative framework within which these repetends work, gesture toward coherent meaning.

2.

At the beginning of the first section of “Vitamins,” and at the end of the second, Carver introduces two terms, vitamins and Portland, whose repetition throughout the text forms a subtext that provides contiguity among parts of the story. Michael Riffaterre defines “subtext” as a “fragment of the larger text, immersed in it and mirroring the whole” (278). He refines this definition by putting forth a necessary condition for its use:

. . . a subtext must actualize the same matrix as the whole narrative, or a matrix structurally connected with that of the encircling text. These subtexts operate as units of reading, so to speak, not unlike themes or motifs, except that a theme or motif has a matrix of its own, born elsewhere, and existing before that of the larger text. (278)

The first term of this subordinate pattern of repetition originates as a paratextual element of the story. The title, “Vitamins,” introduces a term best understood through understanding its parts. And it comes apart easily for it is a compound noun. According to Chambers Dictionary of Etymology, the word is formed from the Latin vita (life) and the English amine (any group of nitrogen compounds), but to the untutored eye, the word also connotes “less life,” or vita (life) and mins (less). That the word vitamins signifies lack, in so far as we take vitamins to make up for the nutrients we lack, reinforces this connotation. When both Sheila and Donna come to realize how diminished their lives are, they plan to go to Portland. Throughout the text, the word vitamins operates in opposition to Portland, a word that denotes refuge and ground, and whereas
vitamins is emblematic of the diminished vitality of these characters lives, Portland is emblematic of wholeness or restoration.

Things kept falling. Something is missing even from what is an arrested epiphany: do things keep falling down? Apart? Once we complete the statement, which we are compelled to do in our search for coherence, we experience our own epiphany. Yes—things keep falling apart, a part. The narrator has been focused on parts throughout the narrative, on only a partial, fragmented view of himself and others. But the sheer excess of these parts gesture toward something deeper, something whole: namely the narrator’s realization, however fleeting and unarticulated, that his life is falling apart, piece by piece, and the reader’s realization that meaning in “Vitamins” is only gestured toward, never realized.

Notes
1 Of course, I do not mean to imply that characters are anything other than the effects rather than the cause of their language. But I do mean to suggest that Carver’s conception of characters dictates his style. Had he chosen to represent richer, more integral characters, he would have constructed them in a richer, more integral language.
2 I read Fachard’s perceptive essay, “Regarding the Ear in Raymond Carver’s ‘Vitamins,’” only as I was editing my own for publication. Although our essays cover similar ground, my own is more rooted in the literary, Empsonian language of ambiguity than in the more linguistic, Jespersenian language of polysemy.
3 Jakobson also uses this term to indicate paradigmatic change in literary history. During any literary epoch, one literary device will be privileged over another. For instance, during the height of New Criticism, the figure of metaphor was (the) dominant over the figure of metonymy, in part because the lyric poem was the paradigm upon which those critics focused. I would argue that because critics such as Michael Gorra understand the primary function of a literary work as ethical, they see the dominant in any given literary work as metaphor. Thus Gorra sees Carver’s work, which is basically devoid of metaphor, as “attenuated.”
4 For an excellent analysis of the interpretive role of reiterative word patterns in literature, see “Reading the Reiterative: Concordance Mapping and the American Novel,” by Jeffrey Allan Jaeckle.
5 I quote this passage at length to illustrate its repetition.
6 I recognize that this is basically what Jakobson does in making the distinction between prose as tending toward the metonymic pole and poetry as tending toward the metaphoric pole, but Jakobson’s distinction has nuances for which I am not prepared to account in this essay.
Eileen Abrahams: The Glass Half Empty: The Poetics of Raymond Carver’s ‘Vitamins’