PART THREE
MINIMALISM AND GENRE

BEYOND GENRE

I.

As we saw in the preceding discussion, Minimalist literature seems to have failed in its attempt to approach minimum, instead defining itself within the confines of the System of the Subject. It must be noted, however, that this does not suggest that literary Minimalism exists without interest. On the contrary, Hallett notes that the emergence of the Minimalist short story required a new critical approach, "that certain standards [had to] be set aside or revamped"[1]. But, although many Minimalists undoubtedly rework the conventional structures of literary discourse, employing often radically reductive techniques of compression[2], they fail to address the negativity in which language and the System of the Subject are ultimately founded – of which minimalist objecthood would be the closest possible approach to minimum – despite the fact that Minimalist literary works rely on this same negativity for their existence. Again, this does not imply that Minimalist writing is bad writing – it is quite possible to sing the praises of these excellent writers. However, this excellence is precisely an excellence of construction, rather than deconstruction, and it is this position of Minimalism that minimalism seeks to counteract.

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[1] Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison.* p135.
[2] See pages 27-29, 45-46.

If the question of Being underlies all investigation, since it is the lost presence, or the returning presence which binds all existence in common[3], then it should not be forgotten that Being is defined, above all, by communication[4]. We may turn to any sphere of investigation for confirmation of this position. From scientific to legal discourse, we find a common thread in the observation that all these discourses consider central the imperative of functionality, in other words, that this specific and specialised knowledge be *put to use* between entities (whether formal or personal) within discourse – and this is nothing other than communication.

So reformulated, Being in the System of the Subject, is communicating (the *being of communication*). Now, we have also seen that language enjoys a certain privilege in this system[5], and also in communication (although this need not apply exclusively to language constructed from phonemes, syllables, syntax, etc.). And literature, as the discourse of discourse[6], enjoys a certain privilege in language[7]. A guiding assumption in what follows, is that literature (in its broadest sense) conventionally communicates the possibilities, the taking place and the failed taking place of communication. This is essentially what constitutes literary discourse in its construction of the veil, which has been a recurring metaphor throughout the present discussion.

Very significantly, this imperative of structuring communication – and its various imagined degrees of presence and absence – is not restricted to or centred in, or through, any specific genre. In this sense, communication behaves as a pivot for generic division, indeed, for the foundation of discourse as a structure. The throwness of *Dasein* into the *Da* (or the taking place of language) is immediately recalled[8]. For, if Being is always already consigned to language, and discourse is always already the discourse of Being, then we discover that communication is also present as the identification of the self (*being-the-I*) within discourse. It is an unsolvable puzzle, yet all its parts are already in

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[3] See pages 40-42.
[4] See pages 6, 33.
[5] See pages 33-37.
[6] See pages 41-42.
[7] See pages 41-42.
[8] See page 33.

place. Moreover, we have also seen that the majority of discourses, existing as they do as the fabric of the System of the Subject, are constituted as prostheses for pure Being, or the communication of pure Being, which is entirely unutterable and unthinkable.

The complicity of discourse and communication is not dominant in any specific genre. Although it may be noted that narrative genres lean most overtly towards a direct communication, this does not mean that the subtler generic forms often typical of drama and poetry are any less dependent on the idea of specific communication. It should also be noted that literary sub-genres are constructed differently only inasmuch as they structure their communicative mandate as difference from other sub-genres. Genre and sub-genre operate, in this light, as communications of communication, be it a specific idea or atmosphere, a record of communication, or a communication of structure.

Romanticism or minimalism – it matters little at this point which incomplete term is adopted – is most often the radical attempt to unwork the communication of communication. It acknowledges firstly that its imperative is communication, for this is its constitution in the System of the Subject. But, in its constitution as the gap of the moment of dying (as we have seen[9]), it does not seek to communicate communication, or even to communicate the *conditions* of Being. Its fervent desire – and this is perhaps the greatest aptitude of the Minimalist Sublime, in particular – is the communication of *Being itself*. This is also the dream of Robbe-Grillet, that "fiction writing…*constitutes* reality"[10], but whereas Robbe-Grillet's phenomenological novel constitutes itself as the reality of the System of the Subject[11], the minimalist work seeks *that other* reality, which is impossible and, yet, of which literary minimalism is the presentation.

Minimalism seeks to present the closest we may come to the *il y a*, not through the construction of a representation, but through a presentation of that great lacuna. To state the case otherwise, minimalism goes beyond the iconic value of the *code of writing* (that

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[9] See pages 53-54.

[10] Robbe-Grillet, A. 1955 and 1963. 'From Realism To Reality'. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots* and *Towards A New Novel*. Translated by B. Wright. p156.

[11] Robbe-Grillet's relationship to minimalism and minimalist objectood will be explored in greater detail below.

is, letters, phonemes, syllables, words, syntax, etc.) to a presentation of the code as a code, which is to say the code as a deconstruction of the communicatory function of communication. What this implies for a study of literary minimalism, is a shift of focus from the function of genre as a container specifically suited to conveying certain types of communication or meaning, to the minimalist genre as an unworking of genre, or a Sublime genre which simultaneously knows its limits and yet knows no limits – in other words, knows itself through its own code, but through this presentation (which is a radical deconstruction of the subject), is also the limit of encoding.

II.

As was noted above, the minimalist literary work, in its homologous functioning to the Literary Absolute, points beyond simple generic division or classification[12]. In many senses, it is under a false pretence that a search for minimalism within traditional genres is now undertaken. The search for *this* impossibility, is not the search for a radical presentation, but an impossibility which is a logical impasse, as, on closer inspection, genre becomes nothing other than a tool of imposition for the System of the Subject. To recall Derrida's words quoted earlier: "the genre has always in all genres been able to play the role of order's principle: resemblance, analogy, identity and difference, taxonomic classification, organization and genealogical tree, order of reason, order of reasons, sense of sense, truth of truth, natural light and sense of history"[13].

When we examine this list by Derrida[14], it is possible to notice a certain proclivity for the System of the Subject, remembering an initial identification of the subject with the occurrence of an action[15]. Are the ideas of taxonomy, genealogy, organisation and order not the very constitution of this system according to a law of action? In other words, are

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[12] See pages 69-72.
[13] Derrida, J. 1992. 'The Law of Genre'. In *Acts of Literature*. Edited by D. Attridge. p252.
[14] And, in this list, we also see Derrida's own consciousness of his dependence on genre, for is "taxonomic classification" (*Ibid.* p252) not one of order's principles, and so deconstruction is also always generic reconstruction, in a sense.
[15] See page 6.

these characteristics of genre not the demarcation of genre, not only as 'order's *principal*' at play, but also 'order's *principle*' *in action*. "Order principle", play, action, subject – these are what one might call the *modus operandi* of literary genre, which is intimately connected to the perpetuation of so-called 'reality' in the System of the Subject, by which it is possible neither to recognise nor to ignore the *il y a*. And, ironically, this is what one might recognise as the ultimate impotence of the subject, which returns us to the idea of imprisonment within the System of the Subject.

The point at which the potentially minimalist literary work conforms to the standard expectations of genre is the same point at which this writing becomes non-minimalist, doing *work*, and abandoning the sublime task of a radical *unworking*. Returning to Lyotard's notion of the Sublime as the presence of the question, "*Is it happening?*"[16], we discover that the guiding question emerges as "how is one to understand the sublime…as a 'here and now'"[17]. This idea of *now* is what founds the Minimalist Sublime as well. Consequently, the minimalist literary genre is situated *now*, that is, as a radical unworking of discourse as history and future – the endlessness of ambiguity or equivocity inaugurated through the infinite reflexivity of irony[18]. As Lyotard writes, "[*now*] is what dismantles consciousness, what deposes consciousness"[19].

Literary genres, as has already been noted, perform the function of the ordering of communication, but also the recording of communication. As such, the notion of genre is one which is an invocation of the past, in the sense that so-called 'reality' is the *a priori* assumption in the discourse of *something* – although we also see, with a fair amount of clarity, that this reality is always already lost to us – and because we are unable to conceive of the *now* as an ordering principle, the past is also the promise of the future, or of the *future as the vessel of future pasts*. This is the fate of completion, that is, of a literary genre which is structured in such a way that there is a conceptual failure to

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[16] Lyotard, J-F. 1989. 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde'. In *The Lyotard Reader*. Edited by A. Benjamin. p197.
[17] *Ibid.* p196.
[18] See Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. p86.
[19] Lyotard, J-F. 1989. 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde'. In *The Lyotard Reader*. Edited by A. Benjamin. p197.

acknowledge itself within the System of the Subject as an inherently open system. It is a tremendous problem, for it implies that the traditional literary genres must remain unsuccessful in their attempts to grapple with this interminable dread of Being and the *il y a* – the presence of *now* – which is what Blanchot claims is the mandate of the writer when he writes that the writer's "impulse is not that there should be a work, but that someone should stand and face this 'point' and grasp its essence where this essence appears"[20].

This problem is the same one which confronted the Jena romantics as they searched for the perfect genre. According to Critchley, "romanticism's audacity is only matched by the extent of its failure"[21], which emerges from the fact that the Jena romantics ideal genre, the novel, which was to be "the unification of philosophy and literature"[22], was never written[23]. But the idealism of romanticism was not futile, because ultimately they did expose the possibility of the Sublime genre, or the genre beyond genre in the fragment, which as I have suggested, is homologous to the idea of minimalist literary objecthood in its self-consciousness of its generic failure and yet its simultaneous generic functioning.

Before exploring the implications of minimalism's super-generic imperative, it is necessary to examine more closely what is signified by the traditional definitions of genre. It is tempting for the writer to always surrender to the great machine of genre which has permeated our western canon so thoroughly. As has been obliquely alluded to, it is still more tempting to assume that generic classification occurs *a priori*, as a first link between the creator as the prime subject and some primordial amorphous substance, *Art*. Despite the problems which contemporary ontology under the conditions of nihilism introduces as regards this assumption, it cannot be denied that generic divisions remain significant in literary studies.

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[20] Blanchot, M. 1981. 'The Gaze of Orpheus'. In *The Gaze of Orpheus*. Translated by L. Davis. p99.
[21] Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little…Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p92.
[22] *Ibid*. p86.
[23] *Ibid*. p86.

We have seen that Derrida's idea of the necessarily prosthetic function of an originary language[24] provides some explanation of this literary demand for an *a priori* condition of reality. Tzvetan Todorov provides an interesting access to the conflict at play in this observation:

> *Literature enjoys...a particularly privileged status among semiotic activities. It has language as both its point of departure and its destination; language furnishes literature its abstract configuration as well as its perceptible material – it is both mediator and mediatized. Hence literature turns out to be not only the first field whose study takes language as its point of departure, but also the first field of which a knowledge can shed new light on the properties of language itself*[25].

According to Todorov, language is the *a priori* condition which is often mistakenly called genre. Returning to Levinas' privileging of literature as the moment in which the *il y a* is poised to 'take place'[26], we see an indirect echo of Todorov's assertion, since in both cases literature emerges as the privileged place of language where language speaks itself – which is either Being thrown into language, or language as Being. On a less subtle level, the material of language (with all its implications) requires itself as the necessary foundation for its subsequent generic expansions, and since pure language is only ever dreamt of, it emerges, too, that genre is somehow lost in language and remains unable to claim its own privilege with any authority.

To turn to a more traditional critical view, René Wellek and Austin Warren claim the following with regard to genre:

> *From [Aristotle and Horace] we think of tragedy and epic as the characteristic...kinds. But Aristotle at least is aware of other and more fundamental distinctions – between drama, epic, and lyric. Most modern literary theory would be inclined...to divide imaginative literature...into fiction (novel, short story, epic), drama (whether in prose or verse), and poetry (centring on what corresponds to ancient 'lyric poetry')...lyric poetry is the poet's own* persona; *in epic poetry (or the novel) the poet partly speaks in his own person, as narrator, and partly makes his characters speak in direct discourse (mixed narrative); in drama, the poet disappears behind his cast of characters*[27].

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[24] See pages 35-36.

[25] Todorov, T. 1977. *The Poetics of Prose*. Translated by R. Howard. pp19-20.

[26] Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p58.

[27] Wellek, R. & Warren, A. 1963. *Theory of Literature*. pp227-228.

That this analysis by Wellek and Warren is excellent in describing a traditional and historically homogenised view, is not in question. Theirs is an eloquent summary of traditional genre. But what emerges as particularly significant to the current discussion, is the identification of genre with the subject. It is easy to note how the poet or author *acts* as a paper character – the fact that "the author is never more than the instance writing"[28], to quote Barthes, dominates all these generic divisions, standing in various apparent degrees of exposure and obscurity within a particular genre as it relates to the reader.

We find further evidence of this position in Barthes' claim that "language knows a 'subject', not a 'person', and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together', suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it"[29]. If this is the case, then the idea of the author, of a play of authority and submission in the semiotics of language and literature, is a demonstration of the functioning of the System of the Subject. The author or poet, as a product of language, is also the confirmation of literature within this system, as well as the 'voice of authority' organising the system. In other words, the figure of authority acts as the *voice of genre*, for Wellek and Warren state explicitly that the "theory of genres is a principle of order: it classifies literature and literary history…by specifically literary types of organisation or structure"[30].

To return to Todorov's contention quoted above, it emerges that the adherence to genre is the same belief that the forms of language are both prior conditions for and the very materiality of literature, whereby literature is simultaneously a product of and a so-called 'case-in-point' for linguistic production. In other words, genre and the author as the apparent manipulator of genre operate as the recurrence of the subject, the appendage of Being to language and language to literature. It is difficult, from this position, to imagine the construction of that gap which is the limit of the System of the Subject, or to imagine the possibility of the Sublime, when the task of the author and of genre is precisely to strengthen the fabric of the veil and to reinforce the disguise of the subject as 'reality'.

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[28] Barthes, R. 1977. 'The Death of the Author'. In *Image, Music, Text*. Translated by S. Heath. p145.
[29] *Ibid.* p145.
[30] Wellek, R. & Warren, A. 1963. *Theory of Literature*. p226.

III.

What we find in the notion of the equivocity of the romantic Literary Absolute and the Minimalist Sublime, is a distinct disinterest in the idea of the so-called 'paper author' referred to above. To state the case otherwise, the Minimalist Sublime is able to operate as such since its auto-critical and auto-productive capacity mean that its position is always somewhat apart from the subject, that is, the writing subject (although its constitution, we know logically, requires one), but also that its presentation remains dependent on the existence of the System of the Subject. If the existence of a minimalist literature tacitly acknowledges the existence of the author, this occurs only inasmuch as the author is already present in the system as the ordering principle, or the principal of genre. As the construction of that gap (which is the delineation of nihilism), minimalist writing appears partly disinterested in the notion of authority in its construction of a gap, but it is drawn back to the 'author' in that the gap is the limit of *something*, which is the System of the Subject.

It is precisely in its auto-productive and auto-critical mode that literary minimalism is able to dispense with this restriction of genre, since it exposes the code of writing as *only the code* of writing, and therefore the code of itself – the code as the code of the code (which is an echo of the infinite reflexivity of irony). It is from here that the minimalist genre is able to allude to itself as the ultimate of genre and to elude the trap of traditional genre. This is, in essence, the same desire that Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy observe in the romantic desire to create a "'genre' beyond all genres and containing the theory of this beyond within itself"[31].

Let us again approach this super-generic imperative through genre. If we are to encounter literary minimalism as the genre of genres, then it is necessary to demonstrate why the

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[31] Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. p86.

three broad generic divisions which, for convenience sake, I shall refer to as prose, poetry and drama, fail to convince as minimalist genres. Certainly this failure has been inaugurated above. We find it in the inscription of the author or poet which underpins Wellek and Warren's discussion.

Returning to the origins of literary genre, we find that, according to the Platonic ideal presented in *The Republic*, poetry is the "assimilat[ion of] oneself to another person in speech or manner to *'represent'* the person to whom one is assimilating oneself"[32], which is really the identification of the lyric as the navigator of much contemporary poetry. Plato goes on to claim that the poet will use this pure mimetic form only in the representation of morally upstanding and essentially good characters or events, and that for lesser ones, the poet will 'slip' into a prose narrative[33]. The far-reaching effects of Plato's argument at least partly account for the privileged status traditionally accorded poetry. Derrida notes of this privilege, that "Plato wants to cut [*mimesis*] in two, in order to separate good *mimesis* (which reproduces faithfully and truly yet is already threatened by the simple fact of its duplication) from bad, which must be contained like madness…and (harmful) play"[34].

When we consider Plato's desire in light of his insistence of the presence of *ideal forms*, it becomes evident that *mimesis* must operate as an empty vessel, since it is only mimetic of either a good or a bad form. Good poetry becomes the direct speech of good form. However, it is important to note that Plato's skepticism regarding *mimesis* cannot be associated with minimalism's overt rejection of *mimesis*, which is precisely the rejection of the subject that the so-called lacuna of objecthood implies.

In contrast to Plato's perspective, Aristotle, from the outset of his *Poetics*, maintains that "the chief purpose of all composition…is the imitation (*mimesis*) of reality. Types of composition differ from one another, however, in three ways: the means they use, the

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[32] Plato. 1955. *The Republic*. 393c. Translated by D. Lee. p151.
[33] *Ibid*. 396c-e. p155.
[34] Derrida, J. 1992. 'The First Session'. In *Acts of Literature*. Translated by D. Attridge. Note 3c. p134.

things they imitate and the different ways they imitate the same things"[35]. This is not to suggest that Aristotle attempts to suspend value judgements of good or bad mimesis, but, certainly, it does demonstrate that representation is of prime importance to both the Aristotelian aesthetic and ethical frame. Moreover, poetry is present in both these classical theories as the privileged locus of literary imagination, since Aristotle suggests that "melody and rhythm"[36] form the basis of the first literary improvisations, which are, of course, basic components of poetry as well.

So, from antiquity, western literature becomes thoroughly permeated by the assumption that poetry is the direct speech in melody and rhythm of good mimesis. This assumption undergoes a radical reinterpretation in the hands of the romantics. As Niall Lucy notes:

> From the Greek words meaning 'creation' and 'to make', from which our 'poetry' is derived, 'poiesy' is a noun of process...It can never as it were 'materialize', or appear as a work of literature in the standard sense...Poiesy is unpresentable as poetry since by nature it is unpresentable in and of itself. Consequently for the Romantics...poetry means 'something entirely new'...in, short, 'poetry' means 'poiesy'[37].

In the romanticism of Jena, what we find is the reorientation of poetry towards an absolute which partly displaces the Platonic idea of good mimesis. For, if poetry is really the *genre of generativity* – poiesis – then its *reality* (if I may briefly use this awkward term) is precisely in its self-constitution, "the initial aim of 'put[ting] forward the unpresentable in presentation itself'"[38], which is to say the equivocity of the romantic *fragment* as the poetic genre *par excellence*.

But, ultimately, the fragment fails to convince, or rather to insinuate into discourse a lasting and final disruption of literary discourse. This occurs because its code is ultimately iconic. Consider the following *Athenaeum* fragment quoted in Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's excellent study:

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[35] Aristotle. 1998. *Poetics*. Translated by K. McLeish. p3.
[36] *Ibid*. p6.
[37] Lucy, N. 1997. *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction*. p65.
[38] *Ibid*. p65.

Spirit is like a music of thoughts: where soul is, there feelings too have outline and form, noble proportions, and charming coloration. Temperament [Gemüt] is the poetry of sublime reason and, united with philosophy and moral experience, it gives rise to that nameless art which seizes the confused transitoriness of life and shapes it into an eternal reality – Athenaeum fragment 339[39].

Firstly, it is necessary to acknowledge a certain awareness in this fragment of typical poetic language – the use of simile and a rather florid lexicon, for example – as well as an overtly philosophical agenda. And this is a typical demonstration of the fragment's auto-reflexivity, for is the fragment not a poetic invocation of philosophy in the search for a poetic invocation of philosophy, or vise versa? Thus, the fragment is constructed on the fringes of the subject. But, because its code is used iconically to invoke the subject, or in this specific case the missing subject, its situation in the lacuna of the limit of the System of the Subject is significantly weakened. Although the romantics did not use this exact reasoning, their conclusion was similar. The fragment, although it is successful in its failure to close on itself – successful, then, in its equivocity – is somehow *not enough* and yet, already, *too much*.

The relationship of drama and *mimesis* is probably the most problematic of the three principal genres. This situation emerges because the simultaneously literary and physical constitution of drama presents a complex axiom which makes an identification of the source of the action (if one may term the situation so crudely) extremely difficult. Aristotle suggests that "the instinct for imitation is characteristic of human beings"[40], which "led to improvisations which gradually evolved and became more sophisticated until people began composing verse literature"[41]. According to Aristotle, the origin of drama in mimetic improvisations precedes literature as a formal institution. This reasoning leads us to the view that there is something primordially mimetic in the idea of an action on a stage, that is, *an other action* (or an action which draws itself from the assumption of the realness of the world which is then to be mimed or reproduced in action). It is important to note, also, that Aristotle claims that poetry develops out of the improvisational urge of dramatic *mimesis*, which partly explains why the majority of

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[39] 'Athenaeum fragment 339'. In Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism.* p81.
[40] Aristotle. 1998. *Poetics.* Translated by K. McLeish. p6.
[41] Aristotle. 1998. *Poetics.* Translated by K. McLeish. p6.

classical drama is written in verse, a trend which has been revived periodically in the western canon.

Aristotle's main proposition appears to be the primacy of real experience over the mimetic form of genre, with the literary genre developing only later. Yet, such a model remains inherently assumptive, for at which point can we say *this is drama*. Surely, it is only when we are able to look back, in other words, when we have a type of history of drama – and, as we have seen, discourse, and particularly written or literary discourse, as the privileged place of history. In the light of poststructuralism, *phonocentrism* proves always too little, always too late – the dream of an absolute origin in a world where dreams mean very little. For, when we consider the field more closely, writing is always already underway.

Now, the Jena romantics sought to alleviate these tensions through a search for the ultimate genre, an hybridity *par excellence*. Ultimately, romanticism's question emerges as "the question of *literary genre*...its answer can only be interminably deferred, continually deceiving, endlessly recalling the question"[42]. So, the question emerges, in the estimation of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, as "quite empty...it should bear only upon an indistinct, indeterminable *thing*, indefinitely retreating as it is approached, open to (almost) any name and suffering none"[43]. Despite, this assertion, the search continues, and the Jena romantics turn to the *dialogue* as both a model of fragmentation[44] and a privileged locus recalling drama as well as the discourse of philosophy, and all this in a subtly poeticised voice. The dialogue becomes "one of the privileged sites for the taking up of the question of genre as such"[45].

But the equation is not complete – of course, in a sense it can never be complete. For what is left, still, is the question of conventional narrative, and what Schlegel eventually envisages is "a *narrative* [*recit*] containing (or recalling) a dialogue, interspersed, in turn,

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[42] Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. p83.
[43] *Ibid*. p83.
[44] *Ibid*. p84.
[45] *Ibid*. p85.

with discourses"[46], which returns to the Platonic dialogue[47]. It is this hybrid genre of genres which proposes to be "the union of poetry and philosophy, and thus the originary matrix of the *novel*, or that for which the Moderns will at last have discovered a name"[48]. But the romantic novel fails – dismally – not only because it is never written, but because subsequent attempts, as close as they may come, always remain subject to the System of the Subject, rather than the absolute of the System of the Subject. The fragment returns as the closest to the lacuna of the deconstruction of the limits of the subject that romanticism and traditional literature achieve.

IV.

Enter minimalism: the apparent stasis of the novel occurs as a result of its inability to stop *speaking the subject*. If we are doomed to speak within the System of the Subject, this does not imply that we *must* always speak the subject. We cannot speak the object – there is no language of the object, for this is the impossibility of the *il y a* as an achievement. But there is the code with which the subject is constituted, the page, the ink, the letters, the phonemes, and so forth. It is here that the possibility of the Minimalist Sublime seems to exceed the romantic Literary Absolute. While both acknowledge that the delineation of the limit of the subject must occur through the *auto* movement of literature as the discourse of discourse, only minimalism emerges as the recognition of the necessary presentation of *minimum*.

Impossibility is well and good, and impossibility is the same impossibility of escaping the System of the Subject in both, but it is the impossibility of *minimum* which fuels literary minimalism, or the search for literary minimum. Thus, it becomes imperative to radically unwork the question of *genre* in minimalism. In fact, the medium of minimalism as the unworking of the media of discourse is simultaneously the unworking of the meta-language of genre. For ultimately, as is demonstrated above in the return of the novel to

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[46] *Ibid.* p87.
[47] *Ibid.* p87.
[48] *Ibid.* p88.

the form of the Platonic dialogue, genre is dependent on the empty vessel of *mimesis*, in Aristotle's terms. The Platonic desire to deconstruct *mimesis* operates analogously to the romantic desire – both wish to dispense with that on which they are founded. As Aristotle demonstrates, the ordering of discourse – that is, the establishment of genre – prevents this deconstruction so long as the language of discourse remains the language of *mimesis*. And we are brought back to Heidegger's assertion that "thinking…the essence of nihilism in non-metaphysical terms demands a transformation of language"[49].

And this is the great promise of literary minimalism, which, although its systemic position within the subject dooms it to failure, remains a promise in its presentation of the deconstruction of language as the code of the code, and hence also as the structure of the structure of discourse. In the auto-productive and auto-reflexive capacity of minimalist literature as *unworked* through the Minimalist Sublime, the promise of the object both looms with the full dread and terror of the *il y a*, but also drifts with a decentred lightness which is that uncrossable *but constructible* lacuna between the System of the Subject (possibility) and the System of the Object (impossibility).

The construction, through minimalism, of this gap is also the deconstruction of genre – for is genre not merely a structure of the System of the Subject, *centred* in the subject, and quite apart from the liminal presentation of the minimalist literary object? And this is why, although we may search for the minimalist genre within genres, we shall only speak of a minimalist genre outside of these traditional confines – that is, *beyond genre.*

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[49] Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little…Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature.* p16.

MINIMALISM AND PROSE: ALAIN ROBBE-GRILLET

I.

The minimalist literary object does not say to the reader, *I am an object*! This would amount to saying, *I am a subject*, for we know that the moment the object is spoken, it is already the subject. Yet, silence is impossible, for are we not always already trapped in the System of the Subject, which is the writing or speaking of literary discourse. To restate the case, the closest we may come to the literary object is the deconstruction of the System of the Subject through the lacuna which emerges from exposing its constituent medium or code *as a code*. Although this is not strictly speaking silence, it is neither *the speaking of silence*, which is the same as the construction of an object through the subject (which is also a subject), nor is it the profound absence of the *il y a*.

The annunciation of the minimalist literary work is neither the saying of the object (the reestablishment of the subject) nor the *non*saying of the *il y a*. It is the *un*saying of the System of the Subject, the delineation of the limit of this system. This is the closest we may get to literary objecthood, and hence we call these works literary objects inasmuch as they belong and, yet, do not belong to the subject. However, the traditional construction of literary objectivity has largely failed to come to grips with these extreme and radical conditions. In order to understand precisely why these attempts have remained unsuccessful, it is necessary to examine them in closer detail.

Various attempts at achieving objectivity have more often than not indicated major shifts in approach to prose composition. Before proceeding to a closer examination of this phenomenon, it is necessary to stress that, although the position of the novel and the short story are, in many respects, quite distinct from one another, it can be agreed that both pertain to a macro-genre which one may refer to rather heavy-handedly as 'imaginative prose'. Without diminishing the important differences between the novel and the short

story, it is more significant, for the sake of the study at hand, to focus on a principal union of the two in the idea of the structure of narrative. Although narrative is present in drama and poetry to varying degrees, even a very rapid examination of the genre of 'imaginative prose' reveals an unusually great dependence on the idea of narrative as the discourse of representation. That *something* which is narrated, although it is true that it is always only the product of the discourse, is simultaneously (mis)construed as part of an *outside* to the narrative discourse in question.

Possibly among the clearest approaches to the position of narrative within the System of the Subject is that provided in Roland Barthes' essay, *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives*. In this model, narrative is presented as a phenomenon existing across three levels: functional, actional and narrative. According to Barthes' classification, the functional level comprises the specific functional (linguistic) units which constitute narrative, referring here to phonemes, words, syntax, and so forth. These may be sub-divided into functions proper[50] and indices[51]. The model deduces that "nuclei [functions proper] and catalysers, indices and informants...are the initial classes into which the functional level units can be divided...a unit can at the same time belong to two different classes...[and] certain units can be mixed, giving a play of possibilities in the narrative economy"[52]. Units operate together to form a functional syntax or combinatory system of sequences[53], which operate as strings of nuclei which are either open or completed[54], and which, in total, form the basis for the plot of a particular narrative.

The second level of Barthes' model is associated with the aspects of character and action. The character is viewed structurally as an actant[55], that which brings about change, and it

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[50] Functions proper include cardinal functions, occupying pivotal places in terms of plot development, and catalysers, which include the various units of information between cardinal functions, creating a specific atmosphere in a narrative. Barthes, R. 1977. 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives'. In *Image, Music, Text*. pp92-94.
[51] Indices include indices proper – implicit information completed on higher narrative levels – and informants, which bring specific ready-made and unambiguous information into the narrative. *Ibid*. pp94-96.
[52] *Ibid*. pp96-97.
[53] *Ibid*. p101.
[54] *Ibid*. pp101-102.
[55] *Ibid*. p105.

is therefore a subject of language, before it can be represented as a human mimetic subject[56]. In this assertion we find affirmation of our consitution within the System of the Subject. Indeed, even the passivity of potential plots on the actional level are constructed according to these precepts of the subject, in other words, constructed as the so-called action of passivity. Barthes stresses that the term *action* should "not…be understood in the sense of the trifling acts which form the tissue of the first level but in that of the major articulations of *praxis*"[57]. In this way, the actional level coordinates functional units paradigmatically[58], allowing the notion of character to operate dynamically within and also beyond its particular operant signs. The actional level regulates whether a functional unit operates as a function or index, or both, hence regulating the relationship between the syntagmatic and paradigmatic elements of the narrative in question.

Barthes identifies the narrational level as the highest level of narrative. Essentially, it involves the integration of functions and actions/actants in a way which exposes their interaction. Simultaneously, it embodies the power by which narrative is presented as narrative. Barthes writes:

> It is indeed precisely in a display of the narrative that the units of the lower levels find integration: the ultimate form of the narrative, as narrative, transcends its contents and its strictly narrative forms (functions and actions). This explains why the narrational code should be the final level attainable by our analysis, other than by going outside of the narrative-object, other, that is, than by transgressing the rule of immanence on which the analysis is based. Narration can only receive its meaning from the world which makes use of it[59].

Barthes' theory of narrative provides an excellent tool for navigating through literature as the privileged place of the System of the Subject. What becomes very clear through Barthes' analysis is the way in which the linguistic sign operates on numerous levels, expanding as it does so, and constituting reality as it 'comes down' to us through literature. Now, given that this tool permits us to understand with more clarity the structures at play in literature, it becomes possible to demonstrate that the so-called

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[56] *Ibid.* p105-106.
[57] *Ibid.* p107.
[58] *Ibid.* p107.
[59] *Ibid.* p115.

objective mode of literature is nothing other than a consolidation of the power of the subject.

In the case of the objective literary mode – which makes certain deceptive overtures towards an incontestability grounded in a sense of 'reality' – it is necessary to recall that the dialectic opposition of subjectivity versus objectivity presents probably the most frequently used mode of identifying authorial position in relation to narrative. However, as with all dialectic oppositions, objectivity requires the implicit presence of subjectivity for its definition. As such, neither objectivity nor subjectivity ever escape the assumed presence of the writing and reading subject. We have also just seen that the author (under the conditions implicit in the delineation of nihilism) cannot be approached solely as a figure of authority, and, consequently, attempts to identify this 'author of authority', detached or objective authority, always fall short of their desired objectivism and serve as a reaffirmation of the so-called 'subjecthood' or *taking-action* of the subject. It could be said that objectivity exists centrally in the general System of the Subject. While the objective literary mode may indicate some desire for universal truth, it cannot be associated with the authenticity of the negative foundation of Being in discourse, or, literature as a delineation of nihilism.

According to Wellek and Warren, the objective mode was first employed effectively in English by Henry James[60]. They describe this method as "the voluntary absence of the 'omniscient novelist' and, instead, the presence of a controlled 'point of view'…the objective rendering of a specific subjectivity"[61]. What is ultimately at play in this method, then, is precisely the dialectic which is exposed in the paragraph above. The novelist as the authorial subject tries to programme into the narrative a selective amnesia of him/herself. The end hoped for, is that by volunteering for this amnesiac project, the authorial subject may be suitably disguised as the seeing subject who exists at "the same

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[60] Wellek, R. & Warren, A. 1963. *Theory of Literature*. p223.
[61] *Ibid.* pp223-224.

size and status as the other characters"[62]. The seeing subject can, however, only ever be conceived of as a subject, as the nomenclature suggests.

The thrust of the objective method proves to be little more than a disguised subjectivism. This can be affirmed by considering these works from the standpoint of Barthes' theory of narrative, because there are clearly functions operating across all three narrative levels. In fact, the objective mode is tied as strongly to the System of the Subject as its predecessors. The reader is made conscious of the author's presence by the very act of objective concealment. As we have seen, what we commonly call *real* is, in fact, not real at all, since we have no incontestable outside against which to measure this reality: in other words, there is *no unreal*, except the encompassing terror of the *there is* which precedes this *no unreal* (the *il y a*). The analogous identification of the objective with realism partly accounts for the blatantly inappropriate association of minimalism and realism, and hence also minimalism and objectivity.

Further evidence of this problematic association in English literature emerges in the *philosophical realism* of the Bloomsbury group. Fraser describes the realistic writer as "one who thinks that truth to observed facts – facts about the outer world, or facts about his own feelings – is important"[63]. The assumptions on which this statement relies are questionable – it is difficult to associate subjective observation ("outer world", "feelings") with scientific facticity. If the position of the realist novel is, as Fraser suggests, a rather simplistic series of definitions regarding fact, external reality and feelings, the inaccuracy of the realist-minimalist association becomes apparent. However, Rosenbaum notes in Virginia Woolf's work a philosophical realism quite distinct from that noted by Fraser. According to Rosenbaum's study, Woolf's brand of realism is closely associated with G.E. Moore's philosophical realism, "the independence of fact from knowledge…moulding experience but not the outer world"[64], which stipulates the constructive importance of sensation[65] (a point similarly emphasised in Merleau-Ponty's

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[62] *Ibid.* p224.
[63] Fraser, G.S. 1964. *The Modern Writer and His World.* p21.
[64] Russell, B. In Rosenbaum, S.P. 1998. *Aspects of Bloomsbury.* p5.
[65] Rosenbaum, S.P. 1998. *Aspects of Bloomsbury.* p4.

Phenomenology of Perception, in which sensation is considered the basic unit of perception[66]).

The identification of James and Woolf is not done to suggest that the two authors are the prime or only examples of the objective literary mode. In fact, the western canon contains thousands of equally valid illustrations. Bernard Bergonzi identifies similar objectivist trends in James Joyce's writing, claiming that "this is undoubtedly what Joyce was attempting in the 'Ithaca' section of *Ulysses*…underlining the objectivity and apartness of things"[67]. But if the objective mode is nothing new in its *logocentric* (and highly problematic!) claims, it certainly finds an unprecedented and unremitting intensity in the prose of Alain Robbe-Grillet. In Robbe-Grillet's writing, we find what may, very awkwardly, be described as the veil of discourse constructed at its most deceptive – the complete, but very valuable, failure of conventional narrative to construct the gap of the moment of dying, the moment of negativity, or the delineation of the System of the Subject.

II.

Laurent Le Sage notes of the aesthetico-philosophical position of the French Nouveau Romanciers, that "some critics have hastily agreed with Robbe-Grillet that the new novelists are joined only in their voiced opposition to the conventional novel…But there is also a link in what they admire…a common enthusiasm for the untraditional novel"[68]. What becomes clear from even a cursory observation, is that the Nouveau Roman identifies itself as an *avant garde* sub-genre – a bold and undaunted challenge to conventional notions concerning creative prose – if not in the fact that it presents something new, for Bergonzi's claim to the contrary is largely convincing[69], then at least in the fact that it identifies itself as *something other*.

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[66] Merleau-Ponty, M. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*. pp3-12.
[67] Bergonzi, B. 1972. *The Situation of the Novel*. p25.
[68] Le Sage, L. 1962. *The French New Novel: An Introduction and A Sampler*. p5.
[69] Bergonzi, B. 1972. *The Situation of the Novel*. p25.

In particular, Alain Robbe-Grillet emerges as the most significant of these novelists who actively *speak their otherness*, even if this speech is most often ultimately situated in the System of the Subject. This position of significance is secured precisely because Robbe-Grillet wrote so many explanatory footnotes and wrote so vociferously and with a clarity which is often difficult to counteract on its own terms because it is so supremely confident. The majority of these writings are collected in Robbe-Grillet's celebrated critical commentary *Towards A New Novel*, which marks the beginning of a radical new epoch in the objective literary mode.

Many of Robbe-Grillet's central aesthetico-philosophical principles emerge directly as a result of his challenge of the traditional genre of the novel. In his essays 'On Some Outdated Notions', Robbe-Grillet attacks "an idea about the novel (a ready-made idea, which everyone accepts without argument, and therefore a dead idea), and not at all the so-called 'nature' of the novel"[70]. Of the traditional view of character as the figure who has "enough of the particular in him to make him irreplaceable, and enough of the general to make him universal"[71], Robbe-Grillet writes the following: "He is now a mummy, but still enthroned in the place of honour with the same (sham) majesty in the centre of the values revered by traditional criticism"[72].

He goes on to launch a similarly vehement attack on the notion that the plot or story of a novel should be "life-like, spontaneous, unlimited, then…in short, it must be natural"[73], claiming that "it's a question of something else, from now on. It has become quite impossible to narrate"[74]. Similarly, the traditional assumptions concerning the didactic function of the novelist are disclaimed as having "rapidly become obnoxious to everyone"[75]. The culmination of Robbe-Grillet's highly passionate argument is that the

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[70] Robbe-Grillet, A. 1957. 'On Some Outdated Notions'. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots* and *Towards A New Novel*. p58.
[71] *Ibid*. p60.
[72] *Ibid*. p59.
[73] *Ibid*. p63.
[74] *Ibid*. p64.
[75] *Ibid*. p65.

distinction between form and content no longer holds true: "a work of art, like the world, is a living form: it *is*, it needs no justification"[76].

And, thus, Robbe-Grillet's rather vehement phenomenological literature is inaugurated as the project in which "the real writer has nothing to say…He merely has a manner of speaking. He has to create a world, but out of nothing, out of dust"[77]. The central issue in this literature becomes the identification of the real object with the dual mechanism of perception and what Robbe-Grillet judges to be the auto-productive function of the New Novel. He claims that the problems associated with literary realism (which, as we have seen, are often considered analogous to the objective literary mode) "completely lose[…] their meaning the moment we realise that not only does everyone see his own version of reality in the world, but that it is precisely the novel that creates this reality. Fiction writing…*constitutes* reality"[78].

The verity of this statement is not in question – this is precisely a paraphrasing of the earlier assertion that *reality* is constituted through discourse, coupled to the observation that literature is the privileged place of discourse, and hence the System of the Subject. Yet, as relevant as it may be in this respect, Robbe-Grillet's stance is hardly revolutionary. This minimalist version of reality (spoken through its equivocity from both within and without the System of the Subject) serves to draw attention to the fact that Robbe-Grillet's objective phenomenology is founded in the same source of naïvety as that which he criticizes in the following quotation: "we are not here concerned with that naïve preoccupation with objectivity which so amuses the analyst of the (subjective) soul. Objectivity, in the current meaning of the term – a completely impersonal way of looking at things – is only too obviously a chimera"[79].

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[76] *Ibid*. p72.
[77] *Ibid*. p73.
[78] Robbe-Grillet, A. 1955 and 1963. 'From Realism To Reality'. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots* and *Towards A New Novel*. p156.
[79] Robbe-Grillet, A. 1956. 'A Path for the Future Novel'. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots* and *Towards A New Novel*. p52.

If Robbe-Grillet criticises the objective mode, what then is his solution? His first identification is that of a "world [that] is neither meaningful nor absurd. It quite simply *is*. And that, in any case, is what is most remarkable about it"[80]. In relation to literary discourse, Robbe-Grillet proposes the following solution:

> And so we should try to construct a solider, more immediate world to take the place of this universe of 'meanings'...So that the first impact of objects and gestures should be that of their presence...In the construction of future novels, gestures and objects will be there, *before they are something...We thought we had come to terms with it by giving it a meaning, and the whole art of the novel, in particular, seemed dedicated to this task. But that was only an illusory simplification, and far from becoming clearer and nearer, all that was happening was that the world was gradually losing all its life in the process. Since its reality consists above all in its presence, what we have to do now, then, is to build a literature which takes this into account*[81].

Now, what emerges clearly from Robbe-Grillet's proposition is the idea that literature is capable of an absolute mimesis, in other words, capable of achieving a presence on equal terms with the world in general. More significant than this, however, is the assumption that there is an incontestable *presence* or *reality* to which literature may appeal, or may lay claim. As we have seen numerous times in the course of the present discussion, this position is simply untenable under the conditions inaugurated by the nihilistic project. There is no stable ontological outside from which reality may be imposed, so reality is always already the product of the inside, or of discourse. There is thus a certain paradox at work in Robbe-Grillet's reasoning which is exposed under these conditions. On the one hand, he claims that literature constitutes *reality*, and on the other, that *reality* is a presence that simply *is*. This paradox is precisely the one which renders the phenomenological understanding of essential truth problematic. It is the impossibility of constructing the presence of the literary object within the profound absence or negativity which pervades the System of the Subject as the eternal return to Being, but of Being in the extreme absence of non-Being.

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[80] *Ibid*. p53.
[81] *Ibid*. pp54-56.

III.

Alain Robbe-Grillet's short prose piece, *In the Corridors of the Underground*, provides an excellent example of this technique of objective phenomenological literature which strives to establish a "reality [which] would no longer be permanently situated elsewhere, but *here and now*, without ambiguity. The world would no longer find its justification in a hidden meaning...Beyond what we see...there would henceforth be nothing"[82]. This suggestion, that literature should be founded in the presence of perception, is conveyed in this work by Robbe-Grillet's construction of a reality in discourse which is on an equal footing with the reality the above quotation identifies as the "*here and now*".

The first part of the work, *The Escalator*, entails a detailed description of a group of people on an escalator at an underground (rail/metro) station. The description demonstrates a certain naïvety – Robbe-Grillet talks of "a long, iron-grey staircase, whose steps become level, one after the other, as they get to the top, and disappear, one by one...with a heavy, and yet at the same time abrupt, regularity"[83]. At the end of the section we are again told of "a rectilinear, iron-grey staircase"[84], and only in passing is this contraption named as an *escalator*[85]. By naïvety, I mean that Robbe-Grillet, by attempting simply to observe that which *is*, purposefully evades an initial definition of the contraption as an escalator.

There is an echo here of Agamben's claim that "in the *name* [the object's] empirical being is removed from it"[86]. Robbe-Grillet's naïvety is, then, a belief that by avoiding naming the escalator, he is able to demonstrate its essential objecthood. Of course, this cannot be achieved, for all objects are known as such only once they are named, and in this naming is precisely their loss of objectivity and their so-called 'conversion' to the System of the Subject. Nonetheless, this technique employed by Robbe-Grillet should be

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[82] Robbe-Grillet, A. 1957. 'On Some Outdated Notions'. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots* and *Towards A New Novel*. pp68-69.
[83] Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. 'In the Corridors of the Underground'. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots* and *Towards A New Novel*. p27.
[84] *Ibid*. p30.
[85] *Ibid*. pp27, 30.
[86] Agamben, G. 1982. *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*. p43.

understood as an attempt to keep the escalator at an ontological distance from its passengers. Although, clearly, a relationship exists between the two, it is certainly not reciprocal in the sense that the escalator derives any fulfillment (in human terms) from its function. In this way, Robbe-Grillet seeks to stress the separateness of things in the world from discourse.

As plausible as this assertion seems to be, it is not unproblematic. Apart from the inaccuracies surrounding the issue of nomenclature and the implausibility of subjectively discovered objecthood, it is necessary to emphasise the inherent structural propositions of the narrative itself. Robbe-Grillet goes to great lengths to select a vocabulary devoid of direct expression other than descriptive detail. In the third part of the work, attention is drawn to the "expressionless"[87] faces of the passengers on the underground. In the first part, the reader is told of the man, when he looks up and around, that "all the features…are expressionless"[88]. We encounter a variation of this term again in the penultimate word of the entire work: "inexpressive"[89].

What this lack of expression or inability to deduce expression (on the part of the observer/narrator) indicates, is less an echo of Hallett's observation in Minimalist literature of a "universe in which 'real' communication is impossible…words are useless, for most things are unsayable"[90], than it is an attempt on the part of the author to imply the inherent rift between the objective reality of presence and the observation of this reality through discourse. In other words, this tension is to be resolved through Robbe-Grillet's invocation of literature as equal to reality. But, as we have seen, this attempt is doomed in its construction of a *logos* or truth, since this can only ever be monitored or reflected on through discourse.

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[87] Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. 'In the Corridors of the Underground'. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots* and *Towards A New Novel*. p33.
[88] *Ibid*. p28.
[89] *Ibid*. p34.
[90] Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. p25.

To continue, the expressionlessness of the people in Robbe-Grillet's narrative – who are little more than empty markers of movement in space and time – attempts to suggest a world of equally arbitrary objects in an arbitrary and essentially meaningless interrelationship. For example, the objectification of the people on the escalator is heightened by their apparent passivity. The group is "motionless...petrified for the duration of the mechanical journey"[91], and the fact that this movement is "almost imperceptible"[92] is repeated several times in the first part[93]. The uniform relationship between people and mechanisms, and mechanisms and other mechanisms, is reinforced through the repeated emphasis on the uniformity of the speed of the ascent[94], which is to suggest that the relationship to time, in a sense, becomes quite irrelevant in determining difference.

In the second part of the work, we again encounter this sense of the timelessness of time, which is to say, the relative inconsequence of the experience of time. The "thinly scattered crowd of hurrying people, all moving at the same speed"[95] is strengthened later in the nonevent of the crowd being "brought to a halt by a closed double gate...They are all motionless"[96], and the fact that, upon trying to enter the train, "they remain more or less stationary"[97]. Time, and motion in time, become the neutral ground on which so-called equal objects coexist separately with only coincidental interrelationships. This is evidenced in the circularity of motion, particularly that of the escalator, the travellers presence being of little overall consequence: "All he can see is the long series of successive steps and, at the very bottom of the rectilinear, iron-grey staircase, standing on the bottom steps, a motionless group that has only just got on to the escalator, is ascending at the same slow and sure speed, and stays the same distance away"[98].

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[91] Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. 'In the Corridors of the Underground'. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots* and *Towards A New Novel*. p27.
[92] *Ibid.* p27.
[93] *Ibid.* pp28-30.
[94] *Ibid.* pp29-30.
[95] *Ibid.* p31.
[96] *Ibid.* p33.
[97] *Ibid.* p34.
[98] *Ibid.* p34.

In commenting on the implications of Robbe-Grillet's attempt to construct the separateness of objects within a circular, but detached, temporal flux, Carmen Garcia Cela claims that "Robbe-Grillet's writing ensures the survival of this 'deconditioning' in the position language holds in relation to itself. In fact, [as a result of] ambiguity…the signs configured by Robbe-Grillet reactivate themselves with every new act of reading"[99]. By deconditioning, Cela refers to the fact that Robbe-Grillet's writing requires the reader to undertake a complete reevaluation of the traditional assumptions of the Bourgeois novel[100], which include, of course, issues of character, plot, structure and so forth, as well as decisions concerning the so-called *realistic value* of the work in question. Indeed, the revolution in objective writing which Robbe-Grillet's work indicates, does introduce a certain ambiguity, but it is certainly not the radical equivocity which emerges in the idea of the Minimalist Sublime.

If the function of the literary work, and, more particularly, the functioning of the signs which constitute this particular work of short prose (*In the Corridors of the Underground*) do contain an ambiguity – and they, like all literature, undoubtedly do – it is by virtue of the fact that the ultimate *reality* of the work is irretrievably lost in the work of writing, and not because the work can justifiably lay claim to some prior privileged status as writing *here and now* (to recall Robbe-Grillet's own assertion). The deferral of the sign in literature is also the deferral involved in the *il y a* in which, in the invocation *there is*, is also always an evocation, a deduction and an atmosphere of presence which is constituted as such by the return to Being, and not the presence of an absence, since the absence is only talked of in the traditional structures of literary discourse, for its demonstration is calling it to presence.

Consequently, one might add that Robbe-Grillet's success in demonstrating the inherent ambiguity of the sign, is also his failure to construct the lacuna which is the uncrossable space between the System of the Subject and the impossibility of the System of the Object. We have seen how this gap may be constructed through the romantic Literary

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[99] Cela, C.G. 2000. 'Hearing in Robbe-Grillet'. In *Poetics Today*. Volume 21, Number 2. Summer 2000. Translated by D. Pessah. p453.
[100] *Ibid.* p453.

Absolute, or through the Minimalist Sublime. The operation of this lacuna stipulates that the work achieves this liberating equivocal status by presenting the unpresentable, or by presenting the impossibility of minimum, not by presenting the impossible as the possible. In other words, the mode of inscription which says that the impossible is possible, or, stated otherwise, that the actant or subject is somehow now miraculously the object – and, moreover, an independent object – is possibly the most austere naïvety imaginable. But, whereas we have seen that romanticism and, through its homologous functioning, minimalism, is a self-conscious naïvety[101], the phenomenological literature of Robbe-Grillet requires the strictest ignorance of the naïvety upon which it is founded, which is the belief in an absolute presence or *logos*.

Ben Stolzfus relates that "the Real, in terms of discourse, is the individual's unconscious relationship with death…Whatever the Real may be, narration is the manifestation of a primordial self that has been displaced and decentred"[102]. Now, Robbe-Grillet's claim that literary discourse constitutes reality, when related to this statement, seems to imply that his phenomenological literature is precisely an extreme displacement of this relationship to death. Reconstituted as a more familiar metaphor to our current discussion, phenomenological literature may be described as the thickest weave of the veil which constitutes our eternal misnomer, *reality*.

Stolzfus' argument presents Robbe-Grillet's literature in the light of the theories of Barthes and Lacan. Although the semiotic psychoanalysis (if I may employ such an oversimplistic term) of Lacan is beyond the scope of the current discussion, it is worthwhile noting that the Lacanian assertion concerning language – that "language can never be identical with what it names…Lack and division are essential to the structure of language, the very structure in which absent reality is made to function as if it were present"[103] – presents an interesting proposition. In this light, the unconscious, as it is semiotically (and linguistically) constituted, proves to be an assumption akin to the

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[101] See Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little…Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature.* p97.
[102] Stolzfus, B. 1989. 'Towards Bliss: Barthes, Lacan and Robbe-Grillet'. In *Modern Fiction Studies.* Volume 35, Number 4. Winter 1989. p700.
[103] Lucy, N. 1997. *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction.* p23.

construction of objectivity within the System of the Subject, in other words, of the object which is actually also a subject. Thus, when we encounter a claim such as Stolzfus', that "the polysemia of his writing replaces characters, plot, and suspense with generative themes, discontinuity, and play"[104], it becomes vital to emphasise the word *replaces* not as the creation of something totally *other*, but as an act of substitution, and moreover an *act* of substitution. Hence, the writing of Robbe-Grillet (which demonstrates a deep affinity with phenomenological, existential and psychoanalytic thought) should not be misidentified as access to the *logos* through the unconscious, but precisely as a writing "which devalues the real in favour of imaginary constructions"[105], but in a way which reinvests these constructions with all the false power of *reality*, remembering that reality is nothing other than the arrogance of saying *it is like this* in the face of the inamiable, yet untenable terror of the vagueness of the *il y a, there is.*

So, while Robbe-Grillet overtly rejects narrative tradition, he is simultaneously bound by it. To return to *In the Corridors of the Underground*, we are able to note an absence of traditional characterisation, that is, the character's inscription as the pivot around which action and events unfold. For example, he describes "a man in a grey suit...who has a step to himself at the head of the group...his left arm bent round close against his chest, the hand holding a newspaper folded in four"[106] on the escalator. Considering the relation of time and motion mentioned above, it is clear that the man is largely passive within the overall narrative system. However, his semiotic figure still identifies itself as a subject inasmuch as it is present as a function within the actional level as an *acting figure*. Furthermore, it recurs in the second part: "their passage is blocked by a man...This person is dressed in a rather shabby grey suit, and in his right hand...he holds a newspaper folded in four"[107].

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[104] Stolzfus, B. 1989. 'Towards Bliss: Barthes, Lacan and Robbe-Grillet'. In *Modern Fiction Studies*. Volume 35, Number 4. Winter 1989. p704.
[105] *Ibid.* p704.
[106] Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. 'In the Corridors of the Underground'. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots and Towards A New Novel.* p28.
[107] *Ibid.* p32.

As successful as Robbe-Grillet may be in "deconstruct[ing] bourgeois ideology and the myth of nature"[108], structurally, his narrative, simply because it is a narrative and knows itself as such (despite Robbe-Grillet's frequent claims to the contrary), is situated firmly within the System of the Subject. Further evidence of this position is provided by considering the implications of the generative techniques which underlie much of Robbe-Grillet's writing. Essentially, the term *generative* refers to the process by which a work of art is generated from an initial idea, sign (or object, but I shall avoid this term for the obvious problems it raises in the present context) or situation. David Leach notes of this creative procedure, "a strong inclination to allow the work to develop from a source outside of…[the work in question]"[109]. Bruce Morrissette distinguishes broadly between situational generators (such as a plot or sequence of events which generate a specific narrative course) and formal or linguistic generators (which operate on a structural level), but goes on to state that "there is no such thing as a pure situational generator, and…there is no situation which does not already occupy a number of forms"[110]. Furthermore, he makes mention of "serial generation…[a] kind of deliberate, serial patterning"[111] which involves the purposeful juxtaposition of generators which are not specifically related to form an expanding narrative series.

Karlis Racevskis emphasises the possibility which generative techniques provide in escaping the trap of a *logocentric* definition of the generator as subject: "it is no longer possible to understand the subject, or the author as a plenitude, as a unified consciousness; it is now seen as a dispersion along three distinctive axes that structure the domain of human perception. The subject is found at the intersection of three orders: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real"[112]. This model is largely derived from the Lacanian perspective regarding the formation of consciousness and identity mentioned

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[108] Stolzfus, B. 1989. 'Towards Bliss: Barthes, Lacan and Robbe-Grillet'. In *Modern Fiction Studies*. Volume 35, Number 4. Winter 1989. p703.
[109] Leach, D. 1983. 'Parallel Methods in Writing and Visual Arts'. In *Generative Literature and Generative Art: New Essays*. Edited by D. Leach. p11.
[110] Morrissette, B. 1983. 'Generative Techniques in Robbe-Grillet and Ricardou'. In *Generative Literature and Generative Art: New Essays*. Edited by D. Leach. p27.
[111] *Ibid.* p31.
[112] Racevskis, K. 1983. 'The Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real: Nexus for the Authorial Subject'. In *Generative Literature and Generative Art: New Essays*. Edited by D. Leach. p35.

above[113]. What is most significant for our current discussion is recognising Racevskis' conclusion that "instead of creating, the artist generates, and the work of art does not point back towards the determinism of a subjective essence; it is not the pretext for reconstituting a consciousness or an unconsciousness that was its source but can be seen as the effect of a generative process; it points to an impossible origin and aims at an exteriority of infinite possibilities"[114].

There is much in this statement that is reminiscent of the Minimalist Sublime, but there is also a crucial and unavoidable difference. Consider the following: if Robbe-Grillet's claim that literature has its origins in the fact that "the world is neither meaningful nor absurd. It quite simply *is*"[115] can be related to a self-constructive reality[116], the construction of which is enabled through the generative techniques mentioned above, then it would seem that Robbe-Grillet's writing does indeed lay claim to an "impossible origin". But what is crucial here is the way in which this "impossible origin" is constructed. To return to the short work discussed earlier, let us imagine (and it is, perhaps, a rather debatable point) that the observation of stasis, of a certain *motion without moving* serves as the generator for the prose which follows. We have ample evidence of this in the work: in the first part, the reader encounters "a motionless group"[117] on an "interrupted journey"[118]; in the second part, stasis becomes uniformity of movement in the "thinly scattered crowd of hurrying people, all moving at the same speed"[119], and there is something in this uniformity of a relative stasis as well; in the third part, the question of motion without moving again emerges when "the crowd is brought

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[113] Racevskis provides an excellent summary of this model and its stipulations regarding the mediation of 'reality' through the combined functioning of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. *Ibid.* pp36-37.

[114] *Ibid.* p37.

[115] Robbe-Grillet, A. 1956. 'A Path for the Future Novel'. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots* and *Towards A New Novel*. p53.

[116] See Robbe-Grillet, A. 1955 and 1963. 'From Realism To Reality'. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots* and *Towards A New Novel*. p156.

[117] Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. 'In the Corridors of the Underground'. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots* and *Towards A New Novel*. pp27, 30.

[118] *Ibid.* p27.

[119] *Ibid.* p31.

to a halt"[120] and when these people attempt to board the train, "they remain more or less stationary"[121].

Now, this generator may be deduced in a number of ways, of course, and from Robbe-Grillet's statements concerning his own works, it is not unreasonable to propose that observation is possibly the central of these methods. And using a generative criticism, of the kind mentioned by Morrissette[122], it is possible to suggest that this generator is reflexive of several situations quite outside of the text itself – the general stasis of contemporary culture, despite the fact that movement is so physically fast, for example (there could be many such arbitrary projections). But what is more important is the fact that the generator is *always* situated in the System of the Subject. To recall Racevskis, it is in the flux between the "Imaginary [as] the realm of absolute...[and] the Symbolic [as] that of the relative and of relations"[123] that the authorial subject is established as the impossibility of an absolute origin[124]. How is this any different from the position which is always already the condition of existence? If we are to categorise Robbe-Grillet as a minimalist, this is the question which requires an answer. And, ultimately, Robbe-Grillet's literature, as relevant as it remains, is unable to answer this question, for the subject simply has no answer to this question of absolutes because it is inscribed in the System of the Subject without the equivocity which is this same system's unworking, or yearning for objecthood or the *il y a*.

Stated differently, Robbe-Grillet's literature proves to be the exploration, within prose, of the limits of narrative, but without transgressing the essential laws of narrative. The word *essential* is particularly significant here, for it is only in the System of the Subject that we are able to construct such *essences* with the confidence demonstrated in both Robbe-Grillet's writing and criticism/theory. What we discover then, is not a radical *nothing* which is the unworking of work, or the work of constructing the lacuna of the moment of

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[120] *Ibid*. p33.
[121] *Ibid*. p34.
[122] Morrissette, B. 1983. 'Generative Techniques in Robbe-Grillet and Ricardou'. In *Generative Literature and Generative Art: New Essays*. Edited by D. Leach. pp30-31.
[123] Racevskis, K. 1983. 'The Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real: Nexus for the Authorial Subject'. In *Generative Literature and Generative Art: New Essays*. Edited by D. Leach. p36.
[124] *Ibid*. p37.

dying between the System of the Subject and the System of the Object. On the contrary, there is a tremendous amount of constructive work or *generation* underway in Robbe-Grillet's prose. It is firstly, the work of establishing the generator in question as an impossible origin, which is to say an absolute object. But, we know that it is not absolute, precisely because it finds its voice so clearly and sweetly singing back to it in the System of the Subject, that is, the ever-expanding tropes of narrative. What we find then, is the conscious construction of the object through the work of the subject, which is little more than a very convincing rhetorical ploy.

This is not to suggest that Robbe-Girllet's writing is somehow ethically dubious – not at all – but merely to demonstrate that it is, ultimately, a part of the System of the Subject which knows itself as the work of the subject, carried out with excellence and distinction, in many respects. The conclusion (as inappropriate as this term may be in the current context) we may reach from this position is that, while Robbe-Grillet's prose is quite possibly the most radical construction of objecthood within the System of the Subject, it is most certainly not an example of minimalist literary objecthood of the kind proposed earlier.

MINIMALISM AND DRAMA: SAMUEL BECKETT

I.

To take a few steps back: we have seen that the equivocity of literary minimalism's position as the self-constituting totality of discourse – on condition that discourse remains the veil which is everything[125] and hence the constructor of the presence of *nothing*

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[125] See page 74.

(which is the same as the object when it is merely the pole of the subject) – empowers minimalism's claim to be the genre of genres, since it undertakes a radical unworking (or, perhaps, unstitching) of the veil from *within* the veil. In other words, it knows itself as both *of* the veil, and yet, *not of the veil*, which is the knowledge which positive discourse, or discourse as the veil, lacks. We have seen how Robbe-Grillet's prose fails to qualify as a minimalist literary object precisely on account of this distinction. As thoroughly as Robbe-Grillet constructs his literature as objective, it is precisely because it exists ultimately as a construction well within the boundaries of the veil of 'reality', and not as the deconstruction of the veil (which is also the construction of the gap of dying between the veil and that impossibility which is not the veil) that it fails in this regard. Because prose *is* prose, the discourse of the subject, it cannot approach the possibility of impossibility, or the object, except through a self-deluding grandeur of speaking itself as the object, when speaking is precisely its confirmation as a subject. Stated otherwise, the medium of prose fails to expose its underlying code *as a code*, always preferring the code as an icon.

The case of drama is perhaps even more complex than that of prose. Recalling the discussion above, Aristotle definitely suggests a privilege that drama possesses in literary discourse. Identifying the two principal dramatic forms as tragedy and comedy, he goes on to claim that "both tragedy and comedy originated in improvisation"[126]. In conjunction with his claim that improvisation is nothing other than "the instinct for imitation"[127] or *mimesis*, we are then provided with a crude genealogy of literature according to which the impulse to mime or to imitate is followed by the expression of this impulse in form, more precisely, the poetic forms of the satire and epic, which then evolve into comedy and tragedy respectively[128].

The question which is relevant for the present discussion, is to what degree does drama always imply mimesis? – for we have already seen that *mimesis* is that 'literary' power which ties us to the System of the Subject. Under the conditions of contemporary

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[126] Aristotle. 1998. *Poetics*. Translated by K. McLeish. p7.
[127] *Ibid*. p6.
[128] *Ibid*. pp6-11.

nihilism, it is almost certainly impossible to identify an absolute truth or object from which the literary 'act of imitation' emerges as a universally relevant comment. In other words, *mimesis* merely exposes the fraudulent activity of objectivity within literary discourse, since objectivity, in its nihilistic sense, is nothing other than that which cannot be reached through any rhetorical construction.

Now, when we consider drama as a separate genre, several obvious elements emerge. Naturally, once the impulse to mime or to improvise has given way to writing (and of course it is debatable whether one could identify this impulse prior to the construction of a broadly speaking 'literary' discourse, anyway) then it is reasonable to assume that a play is first written before anything else is introduced into the western dramatic equation. Immediately there is a complication: the playwright must first conceptualise the restrictions imposed in terms of his medium, that is, the players, physical stage, the audience, the relationship of these spatial concerns to time, and so forth. If the writing of a play is already caught up in a dynamic complex of spatio-temporal concerns, then it should not be forgotten that the play also constitutes a physical text, that is, it is usually published in some form or another, and access to the particular semiotic combinations which constitute the particular work exist, at least to some degree, as a public domain.

Thus, when we speak of drama, we speak of a complex imbrication of writing, reading, acting and staging. Attending a play places into real space and time the decisions of a writer and director, which is to say that the performance of a play occurs as a reinforcement of the System of the Subject within the primary structure of this system, *reality* (real space and time). On the other hand, when one reads a play, a physical space is occupied by the text, but the indications or significations of the text remain in an imagined space. However, both these encounters with drama indicate the primacy of the subject, for, regardless of whether we talk of 'real' or 'conceptual' time and space, these both remain bound by our imprisonment within the System of the Subject, and the impossibility of establishing a foothold *outside* of this system. Without denying the materiality of the text (and it is important to stress that the conditions illustrated above do not imply that the System of the Subject provides it with different orders of reality, or a

so-called hierarchy of the real, all of which are equal in their failure to convince us of their inalienable truth) there is still a popular bias in western literary history that teaches us that a play is best staged.

What this implies for our present concerns, is that a more complete presentation of drama – that is, drama as language and text, direction and action, acting space and audience space, representational time and 'real' time, and the many combinations and synonyms for these – cannot approach minimum, let alone *achieve* minimum. In many respects, drama demonstrates an ideal model for the way in which literary discourse operates as an open system. Its inherent structure points away from itself as text, to another space and another time – that of the stage – and consequently its code or its constituent linguistic signs find an expansion in their performance. In this way, the process of *différance* is structurally enhanced in the case of drama, since it is precisely the dispersion of signs 'into the world at large' which is its *modus operandi*.

Few people would argue that the characters and actions of a play are real, in the sense that the audience is witnessing the course of events of the players' lives. Yet, of course, in a sense, the production of reality in drama does exist on equal terms with that of our everyday life, as we most often conceive of alterity from this voyeuristic, solipsistic perspective. The very act of perception is also the act of constructive positioning of the idea of 'self' within the System of the Subject. What dramatic *mimesis* (which Aristotle identifies as the foundation of literary production) emerges as, is not only the basis of literature, but also as the basis of productivity as a whole, since our situation in the System of the Subject (or discourse, which is our only possible means of construing 'reality') involves only the repetition of signs in the attempt to construct the impossibility of an origin. And what is *mimesis* if not the power of repetition in the face of the impossibility of the System of the Object?

Is it then ever possible for a play to escape representationalism and implicit *mimesis*? Is it not, in its generic definition within the System of the Subject *as drama*, not always already involved in a construction? Dramatic text is simultaneously a real, physical text

and representational. It acts as a prosthesis for action, as a substitute for that which we know ought to follow, the (mimetic) action of the drama. It calls on us to treat it as other than that which it is. Drama is always *about* something – this is the position which its construction in the System of the Subject stipulates. What, then, is the position of drama which is *about nothing*? As was discussed earlier[129], *nothing* is always constructed as nothing from within discourse, and hence the speaking of nothing is also the failure to deliver on its promise. As Levinas reminds us:

> One starts with being, which is a content limited by nothingness. Nothingness is still envisaged as the end and limit of being...But we must ask if 'nothingness', unthinkable as a limit or negation of being, is not possible as an interval and interruption; we must ask whether consciousness, with its aptitude for sleep, for suspension, for epoché, is not the locus of this nothingness-interval[130].

It is in approaching this condition of the *il y a* that Samuel Beckett's theatre attempts to address (if not conclusively answer) the question of *nothing*, which is also the question of approaching the System of the Object and the impossibility of *minimum*, and hence of minimalism in general.

II.

It is not necessary to dwell for too long on Beckett's relative prolificity in writing drama. And, beyond this large number of dramatic texts, we find that nearly all of them are, in the words of Fraser, "little masterpieces"[131]. Probably the dominant theme in all of Beckett's literature is that of dealing with the contemporary condition of nihilism. Remembering that the questions of delineating nihilism and constructing the lacuna of dying – which unworking one could call the work of literary minimalism – are in most respects homologous, the power which informs Beckett's writing emerges as the same one which prompts the radical exploits of the Minimalist Sublime and the romantic

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[129] See, for example, the assertions of Blanchot and Derrida in relation to this point, discussed on pages 34-37.
[130] Levinas, E. 1989. 'There is: Existence without Existents'. In *The Levinas Reader*. Edited by S. Hand. p25.
[131] Fraser, G.S. 1964. *The Modern Writer and His World*. p63.

Literary Absolute. And this is a radical power of impossibility as well as the impossibility of a radical power (remembering that the origin or the outside is always already lost to us). Beckett's work seems only too aware of the impossibility of security and of escape, and of the radical insecurity of its interpreters. As Critchley notes in his lucid and insightful analysis of Beckett's writing: "Beckett's work seems to offer itself generously to philosophical interpretation only to withdraw this offer by parodically reducing such an interpretation to ridicule"[132].

In the celebrated absurdist piece, *Waiting for Godot*, the audience/reader encounters, in the tragicomic utterances of the ineffectual pairs of Didi (Vladimir) and Gogo (Estragon), and Pozzo and Lucky, the desire to exit, to leave the world, which is prevented by their absurd expectation, that someone will arrive (Godot) who will furnish their lives with some meaning. Of course, Godot is no-one or nothing other than *God*, and so we are left with the condition of the characters waiting nowhere (for the setting is nowhere in particular) and for nothing – since Godot cannot come, and a distinct impression that Godot does not exist permeates the entire work. This situation turns out to be the inability to contemplate nihilism, not even approach or overcome nihilism, since we learn from the fragmentary dialogue that the characters are unable effectively even to contemplate suicide. At the end of the play, Gogo asks, "Why don't we hang ourselves"[133], to which Didi answers, "we can't"[134]. The two conclude: "We'll hang ourselves tomorrow…Unless Godot comes"[135]. But their resolution is almost certainly insincere, since the constant refrain of failure, of *we can't*, resounds as the central reminder to all of us – we cannot overcome nihilism.

A similar impotence and lack of ability runs through *Endgame*. Throughout, the reader/audience is informed of the impossibility of death, which, calling to mind Critchley's assertion that we cannot say *yes* to death[136], also turns out to be our inability of conceiving total alterity, or that phenomenon we might describe as *minimum*, the

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[132] Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little…Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature.* p143.
[133] Beckett, S. 1990. 'Waiting for Godot'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works.* p87.
[134] *Ibid.* p87.
[135] *Ibid.* p88.
[136] Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little…Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature.* p25.

portal to that which promises to lie outside of the System of the Subject. For example, the following opening words by Clov clearly demonstrate a desire for death: "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished"[137]. It is possible to deduce from this statement the radical insecurity surrounding the human incapacity for accomplishing nihilism. Clov starts with what might be termed a triumphant announcement, "Finished", which degenerates into a qualified one, "it's finished". Realising our incapacity for accomplishing an internal knowledge of the *il y a*, this hope must again be modified to "nearly finished" and finally degenerates into a desperate plea in the face of impossibility "it must be nearly finished".

What Beckett illuminates through the dialogue between Hamm and Clov is our incapacity to construct or achieve the position of *outside* which is the object from within the System of the Subject, or, in other words, to redefine ourselves as objects. Thus death, nihilism, or minimum remain both a utopian dream and a most radical terror, which accounts for the ambiguous sentiments expressed in the following dialogue:

> HAMM: *I'll give you nothing more to eat.*
> CLOV: *Then we'll die.*
> HAMM: *I'll give you just enough to keep you from dying. You'll be hungry all the time.*
> CLOV: *Then we shan't die*[138].

The blind and immobile Hamm personifies the incapacitating power of the *il y a*, by which the human ontological condition becomes one in which we are able neither to stop living nor go on living, so we simply exist in an uneasy flux which is, in all relevant senses, static. At the end of the play, of the *endgame*, Hamm presumes Clov to have finally left him, although he remains on stage, for he is unable to leave, unable to say *yes* to his own death. Steven Connor suggests that Clov's presence "help[s] to confirm the audience's suspicion that this little scene has been played out between them before"[139].

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[137] Beckett, S. 1990. 'Endgame'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. p93.
[138] *Ibid*. pp94-95.
[139] Connor, S. 1988. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Text and Theory*. p125.

Hamm is left contemplating the suspended promise of his future loneliness: "Clov!...No? Good...Since that's the way we're playing it...let's play it that way...and speak no more about it...speak no more...Old stancher!...You...remain"[140]. Unable to see or walk, Hamm's perception of existence rests heavily on his hearing, and so, to speak is simultaneously to affirm *Dasein* – to reaffirm *Dasein* as it is thrown into *Da*, the place of language[141]. To be silent, then, is to accomplish nihilism, to present that radical alterity of the object. And it precisely this feat that Hamm is unable to accomplish, for no sooner has he uttered "speak no more" than his promised silence is interrupted by "you remain", and he is not only addressing his handkerchief here, but the very construction of reality as discourse. As Critchley notes: "it is a question...of an uneasy and solitary inhabitation of the aporia between the inability to speak and the inability to be silent"[142].

Although, in this particular instance, Critchley is referring to Beckett's prose, the same is true of much of his drama. What we consistently find is the failure of language to provide either a satisfactory explanation for existence or a plausible solution to this problem of being always already trapped in the System of the Subject. In *Endgame* we encounter not only the inability to die, but an inability to have one's life taken. Driven to a point of complete exhaustion and frustration, Clov hits Hamm on the head with the toy dog he has made as a substitute item, since real companionship has failed both of them. Hamm responds angrily:

> HAMM: *If you must me, hit me with the axe...Or with the gaff. Hit me with the gaff. Not with the dog. With the gaff. Or with the axe...*
> CLOV: *...Let's stop playing!*
> HAMM: *Never!...Put me in my coffin.*
> CLOV: *There are no more coffins.*
> HAMM: *Then let it end...*[143]

The absence of coffins in this narrative reality, the inability to stop playing – that is, living and acting, which are both related to our textual constitution – and an impotent desire for ending which cannot be accomplished, demonstrate a profound sense of failure,

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[140] Beckett, S. 1990. 'Endgame'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. pp133-134.
[141] See pages 33-35.
[142] Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p167.
[143] Beckett, S. 1990. 'Endgame'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. p130.

horror and disaster at the inevitability of being riveted to Being, the condition that Critchley repeatedly emphasizes is imposed by the *il y a*. The human subject is at once unable to be active or passive. Hamm cannot die passively, for Clov is unable to kill him, and he cannot act out his own death since he cannot stop talking. As Roch C. Smith notes concerning Beckett's writing: "silence, the only true escape from a labyrinth of words, is…impossible"[144], which not only reverberates at the same frequency as Critchley's assertion (quoted earlier), but correlates directly to Hamm's final words, "You…remain"[145].

Trapped in this System of the Subject – the system of discourse and of language – the human subject, which is henceforth always the literary subject, cannot but live in an irreducible ambiguity. And this is one of Beckett's prime motivations in the construction of a broadly narrative drama in which the characters are constructed and construct through language, but are wholly incapable of mastering this same language. When Hamm asks, "What's happening?"[146], Clov's only legitimate reply is "Something is taking its course"[147]. Now, clearly what its taking place, or taking its course, is language – for is language not always taking place as the very notion of *a taking place*, or a *happening*. And yet, Clov is unable to say *language* is taking place, precisely because although language is always already the first condition, it is also the one thing we cannot master.

This position is brought into clear focus in Martha Nussbaum's essay *Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love*, in which she demonstrates how Beckett's narratives "dismantl[e]…narrative structures that both represent emotions and evoke them"[148]. According to Nussbaum, "literary form and human content are inseparable"[149], which implies that it is impossible to consider literature without it being accompanied by

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[144] Smith, R.C. 1983. 'Naming the M/inotaur: Beckett's Trilogy and the Failure of Narrative'. In *Modern Fiction Studies*. Volume 29, Number 1. Spring 1983. p77.
[145] Beckett, S. 1990. 'Endgame'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. p134.
[146] *Ibid*. pp98, 107.
[147] *Ibid*. pp98, 107.
[148] Nussbaum, M. 1990. 'Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love'. In *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. p289.
[149] *Ibid*. p289.

emotion, but also that emotion cannot be understood without a thorough understanding of narrative structure. This situation emerges as a result of the imbrication of narrative and emotion – that "emotions…are not taught to us directly through propositional claims about the world…They are taught, above all, through stories [narratives]"[150]. If we accept this basic proposition[151], it is easy to see how Nussbaum's claim that the problems associated with emotion are "most adequately expressed – and, therefore, can be most appropriately scrutinized – in texts that have a complex narrative structure"[152].

While Beckett's novels are undoubtedly complex narratives – Smith goes so far as to refer to them as "complicated labyrinth[s] of unstoppable words"[153] – the narratives underlying much of Beckett's drama affect a much more subtle pattern of complexity. *Endgame*, for example, appears as a play in which, ostensibly, *nothing* happens. But, recalling our inability to express *nothing* from any perspective other than its inscription in the System of the Subject, it is clear that something does indeed happen (even if this is disguised as an *outside*). What *Endgame* demonstrates so effectively is the inability to say *no* to narrative conclusively. Even in the warped existences of the characters, there are dissipating traces of affection intertwining through the "progressive disintegration"[154] of the narrative, whose voices, in Nussbaum's terms, "are engaged in one form of this project of radical undoing"[155]. We find, for example, the characters of Nagg and Nell (father and mother to Hamm), who are literally the dregs of humanity – little more than blob-like torsos who have been "dumped in dustbins"[156] to suffer an apparent infinity of existence. Yet, despite this, there appears to be a remnant of affection between them:

> NELL: *What is it, my pet?…Time for love?*

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[150] *Ibid.* p287.
[151] Remembering that even such a critique of propositional language is, unfortunately, always also structured as a proposition – and this is, again, the often bitter irony of existing in the System of the Subject.
[152] Nussbaum, M. 1990. 'Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love'. In *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. p290.
[153] Smith, R.C. 1983. 'Naming the M/inotaur: Beckett's Trilogy and the Failure of Narrative'. In *Modern Fiction Studies*. Volume 29, Number 1. Spring 1983. p76.
[154] Nussbaum, M. 1990. 'Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love'. In *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. p297.
[155] *Ibid.* p293.
[156] Alvarez, A. 1973. *Beckett.* p90.

NAGG: Were you asleep?
NELL: Oh no!
NAGG: Kiss me.
NELL: We can't.
NAGG:Try...
NELL: Why this farce day after day?[157]

And, indeed, this is a very valid question – and the answer is inevitable. The farce continues because we are unable to escape discourse. And so, the emotions of Nell and Nagg disintegrate into an amnesiac rambling, since they can only end up this way, as the informing narrative is so weak, and yet this narrative must remain. To find an exit through the conventional structure and dissemination of narrative is utterly impossible. Again – we cannot go on speaking, and yet we *must* go on speaking, to recall the argument of Critchley quoted above.

In his paracritical essay, *Joyce, Beckett, and the Postmodern Imagination*, Ihab Hassan describes Beckett's process of writing as one which "restores to words their primal emptiness and mimes [its] solitary way into the dark"[158]. What we may deduce from this quotation is that Beckett's work is mimetic, broadly speaking. Connor identifies this mimetic imperative in the repetitive structures of *Endgame*, "which induce consciousness not of the stage as simply itself, but of the stage as a space of representation – even if its is the minimal representation of itself"[159]. But, aside from this self-reflexivity, there is another radical *mimesis* at work, an attempt to recognise, through the silent act of miming, a prior or original silence, an emptiness of the object – and since this can only be expressed through language, Beckett's attempts must amount to an emptying of words of their semiotic power. Beckett's work emerges as an "articulate silence"[160] in which he "redefines originality as a flight from originality, imagination as an escape from amplitude, language as silence"[161].

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[157] Beckett, S. 1990. 'Endgame'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. p99.
[158] Hassan, I. 1995. 'Joyce, Beckett, and the Postmodern Imagination'. In *Rumors of Change: Essays of Five Decades*. p103.
[159] Connor, S. 1988. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Text and Theory*. p124.
[160] *Ibid.* p106.
[161] *Ibid.* p105.

But, to repeat our present position, our existence in the System of the Subject, particularly our position in literature (as the privileged place of the subject), makes silence impossible. It is the impossibility of silence which leads Critchley to conclude that "silence is not...the goal of [Beckett's] work, rather writing is the necessary *desecration* and *desacralization* of silence"[162]. We have already seen that Beckett's drama effects a subtle narrative complexity which, although it is not as thoroughly narrational as much prose, still adheres to the basic precepts laid down by Barthes in *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives*[163]. Critchley identifies in Beckett's writing "a relentless pursuit, across and by means of narrative, of that which narration cannot capture, namely the radical unpresentability of death"[164], a radical "disjunction between the time of narrative and the time of dying"[165], which as we have seen manifests as the inability to achieve minimum or to approach minimum through the conventional structures of literary discourse. In this regard, Connor adds that Beckett's writing demonstrates a keen awareness of "the paradox of all time; that is, that the only tense we feel has real verifiable existence, the present, the here-and-now, is in fact never here-and-now. The present tense can never simply 'be', because...[it] can only be apprehended the split-second before it happens, or the split-second after"[166].

Recalling Nussbaum's assertions concerning the inseparability of narrative and our experience of existence, and Critchley's observation that "like Hamm, we *are* cursed, cursed by the need for narrative"[167], the insight with which a drama like *Endgame* provides us, is a clear view of the failure of even the most austere drama to exist as a minimalist literary object. The System of the Subject constitutes our furthest possibilities, unless our efforts undertake a radical unworking of the system of discourse by exposing it as its constitutive code. Consequently, it is not surprising to learn that Hamm's experience of the room in which he lives out his existence is also his entire experience of the world:

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[162] Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature.* p152.
[163] See pages 105-106 and notes 50 and 51 of the present part.
[164] Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature.* p160.
[165] *Ibid.* p161.
[166] Connor, S. 1988. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Text and Theory.* p120.
[167] *Ibid.* p180.

Take me for a little turn...Not too fast! Right round the world!...Hug the walls, then back to the centre again...I was right in the centre, wasn't I?...(CLOV stops chair close to back wall. HAMM lays his hand against the wall.) Old wall!...Beyond is the...other hell[168].

For Hamm, existence is defined primarily by language. The room, or the world, is only a room inasmuch as he can describe it in language. Stripped of his sight, he is not even able to confirm its three-dimensionality. Now, in the case of *Endgame*, the room is further dependent on language, since in the staging of the play, the fourth wall is necessarily absent to allow for the presence of the audience. And so, the room appears as a very clear product of language and of discourse, and in a similar way, so is Hamm's 'world', and our own. And "beyond is the...other hell" – *hell*, since it is entirely unknowable within the structures of drama and in this aspect entirely threatening; *other*, because it is that unspeakable alterity of the *il y* a. What we find, then, in *Endgame* is a room which is discourse, a room walled by language and the System of the Subject, to which there is no real outside. Consequently, *Endgame* speaks primarily of the inability to construct the object through the System of the Subject. The characters try to die repeatedly, they try to remain silent, or to grasp alterity, but as long as their dramatic existence is owed to the form, to drama, there can be no deduction beyond the subject, or of constructing that lacuna which promises the impossible access to minimum, that gap which is the product of the Minimalist Sublime, of the recall to the radical insecurity – *is it happening?* – and the place of the minimalist literary object.

III.

From Blanchot's essay, *The Gaze of Orpheus*, we learn that "in order to write one must already be writing"[169]. In other words, we can only write *nothing* through something, and we can write the word 'minimum', but never approach *minimum*. It is possible to say, "I have come to grips with Being as it is inaugurated by the expression of the *il y a*; I have accomplished nihilism". But it is not possible do either of these things – it is impossible

[168] Beckett, S. 1990. 'Endgame'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. p104.
[169] Blanchot, M. 1981.'The Gaze of Orpheus'. In *The Gaze of Orpheus*. Translated by L. Davis. p104.

to *demonstrate* them, at least within the usual structures of literary genre. Thus, in the case of *Endgame*, Beckett does not attempt to unwork the structures of the genre (although he does subvert them considerably), preferring to inscribe more general situations of Being under the conditions of nihilism. Unable, then, to come to terms structurally with the possibility of the lacuna between the System of the Subject and the impossible condition of the System of the Object, broadly nihilistic generic drama such as Beckett's is fated to repetition: repetition of the subject, of the subject as object, and of the knowledge of the inevitability of impossibility.

Steven Connor's study of Beckett's writing emphasises repetition not only as an important *leitmotif*, but also as an essential structural element allying Beckett's work to a rigorous philosophy of Being. Although the current space does not allow suitable scope for an extensive investigation of Connor's account, several aspects are significant to the argument at hand. This view is derived primarily from the work of Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze. From Derrida's argument, Connor concludes that "if repetition is dependent upon a preexisting originality, it is also possible to turn this round and argue that originality is also dependent upon repetition…originality…can never be apprehended as such unless the possibility exists for it to be copied"[170]. Consequently, repetition reconstitutes itself as the primary, and the original appears in this light as "always missing from repetition and constituted as a magnetic point of desire within it"[171].

Deleuze picks up on repetition as the source of difference. According to Connor's summary, "identities are similarly defined by the differences which place and constitute them, but the effect of perceiving difference is always to reinstate the sense of an original identity"[172]. To relate this statement to our present argument, what emerges clearly is the fact that the literary work is able to identify itself through difference, which is in itself nothing new. However, since difference is construed only through repetition, the literary work is further envisaged as a complex of repetitions. As Connor demonstrates:

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[170] Connor, S. 1988. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Text and Theory.* p3.
[171] *Ibid.* p5.
[172] *Ibid.* p5.

In order to be recognizable as such, a repetition must, in however small a degree, be different from its original. This 'difference' is invisible except in the fact of its pure differentiality. Functioning in this way, repetition becomes a kind of weak point in the principle of identity...mark[ing] the point where the confirming presence of difference melts away, leaving identity only itself to confirm itself. Repetition is difference without force – or without force to guarantee identity – and therefore a principle which can force identity apart[173].

In the operation of repetition as a "principle of power"[174], repetition emerges as a principle of instability, that which, ironically, disables the power of discourse while still confirming it as the only power. In this sense, repetition is associable with the Nietzschean nihilistic idea of *eternal recurrence*[175] as a "form of absolute differentiality"[176], which is to say, repetition dreams of overcoming nihilism, but, as is the case with Nietzsche, the dream only draws us more closely to the total incapacity of identifying an origin and establishing an outside of discourse, or an "absolute differentiality" from within the same system.

In many respects, these views of repetition – as difference without force (Deleuze) and as the amnesiac desire for the original (Derrida) – are at work in Beckett's writing. Connor identifies in Beckett an "attempt[...] to deny or negate by means of the complex detours of affirmation, to efface by means of repetition"[177], which is to say, to speak the unworking which is characteristic of the Minimalist Sublime and the romantic Literary Absolute. What Beckett's complex repetition involves, then, is "repeating the fact of death in advance, end[ing] by not ending"[178]. When operating within *genre*, *this* is as close as we may approach to a representation of minimum (which is, of course, entirely generically unrepresentable) – that is, as close to minimum from within a genre of the System of the Subject which is not an unworking of genre.

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[173] *Ibid.* p7.
[174] *Ibid.* p14.
[175] Martin Esslin associates Beckett's demonstration of repetition and infinity with Nietzsche's *eternal recurrence* in the following statement: "there is infinity as the circle that runs into itself and thus can have no end. This circular concept of infinity...merges into Nietzsche's idea of the endless cycle of recurrence, based on the assumption that, if there is a finite amount of matter in the universe and infinite time, the same combinations and permutations of the same elements must endlessly recur". (Esslin, M. 1986. 'Samuel Beckett – Infinity, Eternity'. In *Beckett at 80/Beckett in Context*. Edited by E. Brater. p114).
[176] Connor, S. 1988. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Text and Theory.* p7.
[177] *Ibid.* pp9-10.
[178] *Ibid.* p10.

Aside from these theoretical implications, Beckett's use of repetition is interesting for several other reasons. Firstly, we must recall that Minimalists, particular in the visual arts and music, make extensive use of repetition[179]. One of the principal functions of this repetition is to draw attention to the unity of the object, of the fact that these Minimalists consider themselves to be inverting the Duchampian *object-as-artwork* to the Minimalist *artwork-as-object*[180]. Convinced that they were making objects[181], Minimalists viewed repetition, particularly serial repetition[182], as integral tools in the search for objecthood. Secondly, as pointed out by Connor, Beckett's repetition involves the subversion of the conventional views of narrative time: "the ubiquity of repetition and the insistence of series in Beckett's work prevents us from seeing the first time…as…primary, or the second time…as terminal"[183]. This position draws us back to the basic condition exposed by Beckett's writing: the inability to both continue and to stop speaking, the presence and yet absence of the *il y a*.

Three principal types of repetition are evident in Beckett's drama: lexical repetitions (of certain words, phrases, etc.), external structural repetitions (the relationship between the stage and audience, for example, or the text and reader), and formal or internal structural repetitions. In terms of the first, Beckett's work provides numerous examples of particular phrases or words which illustrate the inability to *have done with speaking*, or to achieve silence. In *Endgame*, Clov despairingly remarks, "All life long the same questions, the same answers"[184], which, later, reemerges through Hamm's empty enthusiasm as, "I love the old questions…Ah the old questions, the old answers, there's nothing like them"[185]. Not only is there a physical repetition of the words, but these statements serve to direct the audience/readers to view repetition as the negation of difference, the dooming of Being to discourse, and discourse to unaccomplished and facile repetition.

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[179] See pages 21, 25-27.
[180] Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p106.
[181] Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p126.
[182] See page 21, and note 84 of part one.
[183] Connor, S. 1988. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Text and Theory*. p121.
[184] Beckett, S. 1990. 'Endgame'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. p94.
[185] *Ibid*. p110.

Is there any hope for the characters in Beckett's work? While writing within the genres of the System of the Subject, there is always hope, but it is a sham-hope, a trick of language, which is enough to live on, since it is all we have to live on, but it cannot convince us of the possibility of an outside. Consequently, when, in the same play, Hamm repeatedly asks for his pain-killer[186] – the symbol of his hope for either a transcendent experience of discourse or his transcendence of discourse itself – we are not surprised when Clov refuses him, and even less surprised, when Clov eventually responds: "there's no more pain-killer...no more pain-killer. You'll never get anymore pain-killer"[187]. As we have seen, to experience *real* killing, as to accomplish *real* death, is impossible within the confines of narrative or in the dramatic genre of the System of the Subject.

Most critics identify in Beckett's work an unusual preoccupation with mathematical language and arithmetic calculations and repetitions. Connor notes in the novel, *Watt*, that "if the language of the book is mathematical...then mathematics also provides a different promise of control; for mathematics can have the function of a metalanguage, which can place and subordinate the more slippery, perishable forms of verbal language"[188]. Hassan, in turn, associates Beckett's use of mathematics with a "representative experience, a segment in an endless series"[189] and, since the language of numbers is meant to "empt[y] the mind of reference"[190], it can be seen as an attempt to place the System of the Subject within an overarching logos in order to construct a mathematical escape-hatch of sorts. In *Endgame*, for example, our attention is continually drawn to Clov's observations of *zero*:

> HAMM: *What time is it?*
> CLOV: *The same as usual.*
> HAMM: *...Have you looked?*
> CLOV: *Yes.*
> HAMM: *Well?*
> CLOV: *Zero*[191];

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[186] *Ibid.* pp95, 97, 104, 127.
[187] *Ibid.* p127.
[188] Connor, S. 1988. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Text and Theory.* p173.
[189] Hassan, I. 1995. 'Joyce, Beckett, and the Postmodern Imagination'. In *Rumors of Change: Essays of Five Decades.* p104.
[190] *Ibid.* p104.
[191] Beckett, S. 1990. 'Endgame'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works.* p94.

CLOV: *Let's see*...[He looks, moving the telescope.] *Zero*...[he looks]...*zero*...[he looks]...*and zero.*
HAMM: *Nothing stirs. All is* –
CLOV: *Zer* –[192].

What we find here, however, is nothing other than the impossibility of zero, of minimum, or of nothing. As Esslin notes: "no percentage reduction can ever reduce a finite number to zero – complete nothingness"[193]. Although mathematical approximations of zero are possible, the presentation of *zero* in discourse is as impossible as saying nothing, which implies that in writing zero, we encounter the same inscription of *something* within the System of the Subject which rivets us to existence and Being.

The second type of repetition we find in Beckett's writing, external structural repetition, is often present on a much subtler level than lexical repetitions. However, since the principal focus of our current discussion is the search for the minimalist literary object, I shall proceed immediately to a discussion of the internal formal repetitions and concerns of Beckett's dramatic texts. Connor identifies in *Endgame* a "self-doubling"[194] which occurs as a result of the continuous play of self-reflexivity[195] within the text, that results in a formal self-consciousness. The *game* theme, for example, is repeated several times: Hamm's opening line reads "Me – to play"[196], and the work ends with a recapitulation of the same – "let's play it that way"[197]. What the patterning of the play as a formal game, a dialogical game, seems to indicate is, firstly, the inescapability of the subject, since even the form of the genre is involved in a type of self-reflexive, self-propulsive recurrence, a substitution of the implicit flux of repetition for the illusion of the fixed position of the subject.

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[192] *Ibid.* p106.
[193] Esslin, M. 1986. 'Samuel Beckett – Infinity, Eternity'. In *Beckett at 80/Beckett in Context*. Edited by E. Brater. p117.
[194] Connor, S. 1988. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Text and Theory*. p123.
[195] *Ibid.* pp123-124.
[196] Beckett, S. 1990. 'Endgame'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. p93.
[197] *Ibid.* p133.

Enoch Brater claims that in much of Beckett's drama "the performance becomes the play"[198], highlighting the ambiguity inherent in much of Beckett's work regarding the dramatic expectation of *mimesis*. If we accept Brater's claim – that Beckett's drama implies the dominance of the action over the text – then what we are confronted with is the possibility of the drama as pure presence. This, then, would be the closest proximity of drama to minimalism. However, as we have seen repeatedly, the intervention of perception is also the intervention of the subject, or rather, the reminder that we can only ever perceive from the position of the System of the Subject. The argument becomes dubious.

This aspect, of performance as the play itself, can be seen in the incessant footsteps in *Footfalls*, in which Beckett centres the text around a physical movement, the eight footsteps taken by the character, May, before repeating the action in the opposite direction. Brater points out that Beckett's affinity for eight is often associated with infinity, as the number *8*, when placed on its side, is the mathematical symbol for infinity (∞)[199]. Beckett seems to suggest an infinity of movement, or of *play* – movement towards nothing specific, as is suggested by the ending of the play:

> *Will you never have done?* [Pause.] *Will you never have done...revolving it all?* [Pause.] *It?* [Pause.] *It all*. [Pause.] *In your poor mind*. [Pause.] *It all*. [Pause.] *It all*. [Pause. Fade out on strip. All in darkness]*[200].

Again we are reminded of Critchley's assertion regarding the inability in Beckett's plays of the characters to go on and similarly to stop. In other words, "it all", the System of the Subject, cannot be done, since the dramatic genre, regardless of how form and text are imbricated (and not forgetting that they are always imbricated anyway) is never in a position to unwork the prohibition of its *alter*, the nothingness of the object, demonstrated and not spoken.

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[198] Brater, E. 1987. *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's Later Style in the Theatre*. p4.
[199] *Ibid*. pp61-63.
[200] Beckett, S. 1990. 'Footfalls'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. p403.

The physical action by the player in *Footfalls* not only mirrors, but, in an important sense, also dominates the metaphysical implications of the play. But the movement is still enabled by the text, and this is again the atmosphere of the *il y a* on which the writer is dependent, despite the terror it evokes. The infinite footsteps are not the progression towards nothingness, but a reminder that we are trapped in *Da*, in the place of language. In this important sense, the performance as the play, the concept which Brater and others espouse, is always contingent on a critical amnesia, the forgetting of the forgetting of Being, by which I mean that the implicit phenomenological appeal that this view contains – *it is there* – can only be reformulated as the tentative utterance *there is (il y a)* in the face of the sublime question *is it happening? now?*

In *Not I*, Beckett makes similar use of the idea of the performance as play. Here, the focus of the audience is drawn to a dismembered mouth, the character aptly called *Mouth*. The incessant movement of Mouth comprises the main action of the play, which is indeed minimal, although the other silent character, Auditor, does make the occasional slow gesture, although these gestures are progressively weaker. Now, the questions which Mouth poses for the conventions of theatrical form are the following: is this mouth representational of an entire body, or is it simply an object on stage?; does it point to *mouthhood* as a part of bodyhood, or is it the *mouth of transcendental mouthhood*, the absolute mouth, if you like? In the end, Mouth emerges primarily as a challenge to the traditional values of theatre as a reinforcement of the *part-of-the-whole* quality characteristic of postmodern literature in general[201].

Critchley notes that the repetition of Mouth's utterance: "what?...who?...no!...she!"[202] five times in the course of *Not I*, which, in his only note to the text, Beckett declares to be the "vehement refusal to relinquish the third person"[203], embodies the "irreducible logic of spectrality at work in literature"[204]. What we apprehend in this assertion is not only the vague echo of the *il y a* which haunts our every action of discourse, but also the terror it

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[201] See Brater, E. 1987. *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's Later Style in the Theatre.* pp4, 23.
[202] Beckett, S. 1990. 'Not I'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works.* pp377, 379, 381, 382.
[203] *Ibid.* p375.
[204] Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature.* p174.

brings us in the knowledge that we are always already prone towards the solipsistic slide of the subject. Regardless of how weak Beckett's syntax becomes[205] – and it cannot be denied that the syntax of *Not I* is one under great stress – it remains syntax, which is to say, the substance of the System of the Subject, and a formal failure to expose the code of the medium of writing as *only a code*.

IV.

Where does this leave us in relation to Samuel Beckett's writing and, moreover, in relation to the possibility of minimalist drama? Is Beckett a minimalist? Hassan describes Beckett as a "minimalist of consciousness"[206], by which he means that Beckett's literary output can be viewed as a concerted attempt to eliminate consciousness, to eradicate the experience of Being and thereby pass from a binding experience of the subject within the System of the Subject, to the experience of the object in the System of the Object.

What we find in Beckett's literature is primarily a symbolic silence[207], a speaking of silence which constructs itself through both the philosophical impossibility of accomplishing death, as well as the subversion of form, which is an acknowledgement of the inadequacy of the traditional literary genre of drama in constructing the lacuna which promises access to literary objecthood. However, Beckett's drama, *as drama*, cannot succeed in the total subversion of literary genre which the equivocity characteristic of the Minimalist Sublime as the literary *genre of genres* requires. While Beckett dreams of the closed system, he dreams of this through genre, which means that he dreams of closure even as he constructs an opening literary system.

That Beckett's brand of nihilism is radical, and exists as an unworking of the subject is not in question. However, this type of unworking does not necessarily imply that it

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[205] Critchley undertakes an excellent discussion of this topic. (*Ibid.* pp165-171).
[206] Hassan, I. 1995. 'Joyce, Beckett, and the Postmodern Imagination'. In *Rumors of Change: Essays of Five Decades*. p117.
[207] *Ibid.* p114.

constructs the gap which is simultaneously part of, and yet not part of, the System of the Subject. From Connor's discussion of original, difference and repetition, we learn that there is a mutual dependence between these terms. It is a similar dependence as that which exists between Hamm and Clov in *Endgame* – Hamm cannot stand, Clov cannot sit[208]. But what is true originality? – this is the question which genre ultimately structurally evades. For true originality is utterly new, utterly unrecognisable, and consequently, will be neither spoken nor recognised as such. Critchley writes the following:

> It is not true to say that Beckett's work is meaningless as if meaninglessness were a fact that did not need to be conceptually communicated; rather it is a question of establishing the meaning of meaninglessness, making meaning out of the refusal of meaning that the work performs without that refusal of meaning becoming a meaning[209].

But this play of meaning remains the concern of the subject – recognisable, reproduced interminably as both the reproduction and the original. It is not the radical alterity of the object. From within the traditional literary genres, this is utterly impossible.

MINIMALISM AND POETRY: THE $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ POETS

I.

To end an investigation of genre with a discussion of poetry may seem somewhat awkward if we consider Aristotle's claim that "our natural instinct for imitation...gradually evolved...until people began composing verse literature"[210]. In this

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[208] Beckett, S. 1990. 'Endgame'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. p110.
[209] Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature.* p151.
[210] Aristotle. 1998. *Poetics.* Translated by K. McLeish. p6.

light, poetry is presented as a logical progression from improvisational *mimesis*; one might say poetry is the proto-form of literature. And, since the operation of genre is primarily one of construction within the System of the Subject, it is not unreasonable to expect a discussion of genre to follow a progressive additive model of construction: from mime, to poetic language, to drama and dialogue, to fragment, to novel, and eventually to the plethora of genres we find in current literature. Although I cannot claim that this progression is incontestable, it is almost certainly a progression of denial, or a progressive denial. What I wish to suggest is that genre presents the denial *par excellence*, since it promises to do precisely what it cannot, that is, impose on discourse an incontrovertible order, remembering that Derrida notes how "genres...play the role of order's principle"[211].

Genre fails. Genre has to fail, for, as the organised mode of expression of the *il y a*, as the inscription of *Dasein*, it is subject to the very conditions of negativity it attempts to organise. In other words, the mode of organisation is incapable of maintaining itself in the eternal recall to the atmosphere of terror which pervades reality as expressed in discourse, or as the riveting of organisation to the impossibility of absolute organisation, a situation in which "anything can count for anything else"[212].

In the light of this failure of genre, the inevitable complication of generic construction proves to be a radically insecure gesture. Regardless of which genre is in question, defeat is *a priori* when genre defines itself as *a* genre. What I am referring to here is the definition of poetry which is grouped into various sub-genres such as the epic and satire, ode and lyric. The reason that these types are situated so inescapably within the System of the Subject, is based less on an actual function than on the way these sub-genres make themselves known. Simply stated, all of these genres share the notion that their form is somehow subservient to their content. We have seen in McLuhan's terms how this assertion is necessarily problematic[213]. Consequently, we are opened up to two main

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[211] Derrida, J. 1992. 'The Law of Genre'. In *Acts of Literature*. Translated by D. Attridge. p252.
[212] Levinas, E. 1989. 'There is: Existence without Existents'. In *The Levinas Reader*. Edited by S. Hand. p31.
[213] See pages 74-76.

understandings of poetry – either as a principle of order, which is the view I refer to above, or as a principle of literary originality, if not origin. And, recalling Connor's report of Derrida's assertions regarding originality, that "the origin is…always missing from the repetition and constituted as a magnetic point of desire within it"[214], poetry could emerge as just such a "magnetic" point, an imaginary original conceptual matrix.

The magnetism which emerges from the inability to inscribe an origin and yet the compulsion to attempt this inscription, is evident in the version of poetry exposed by romanticism's posing of the question: "what is literature?"[215]. This very broad question is typical of the inclusive power of the romantic concern with equivocity, but could be easily reformulated numerous times as *what is romanticism?*, *what is poetry?*, and so forth. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy claim that "literature, as its own infinite questioning and as the perpetual positing of its own question…its answer can only be interminably deferred, continually deceiving, endlessly recalling the question"[216]. This formulation amounts to the implicit inconclusion of romanticism as a genre, and, of course, applies equally as structural equivocity. It is thus not surprising to find that the poetic project of romanticism is one of "becoming"[217], that is a genre of incompletion which is thus able to empower "the poetic or literary genre as genre of genres"[218].

According to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, the romantic 'System-Programme' dreamt primarily of creating a matrix in which the unification of poetry and philosophy could be accomplished[219]. In this regard, Agamben's discussion in *Language and Death* notes that "even poetry seems here to experience the originary event of its own word as *nothing*"[220] – that is, poetry becomes a recapitulation to the *il y a*, because it cannot but operate as such. It is in this combination of philosophy and poetry as the genre beyond generativity

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[214] Connor, S. 1988. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text*. pp4-5.
[215] Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. p83.
[216] *Ibid*. p83.
[217] *Ibid*. p83.
[218] Derrida, J. 1992. 'The Law of Genre'. In *Acts of Literature*. Translated by D. Attridge. p229.
[219] Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. p28.
[220] Agamben, G. 1991. *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*. p74.

and, yet, capable of infinite proliferation, that we find a satisfactory link to the project of literary minimalism, and, moreover, to the work of the group of writers collectively known as the $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$[221] poets.

The use of the term *collective* is particularly significant here, and provides us with a first bridge between the radical equivocity enabled by the romantic Literary Absolute and the Minimalist Sublime, and the activities of the *LANGUAGE* poets. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy reveal that "the principle of the collective writing of fragments...through what is referred to as 'symphilosophy' or 'sympoetry'...[aims to] ensure the universality of the vision of the whole...[through a particular] *method*...suitable for access to truth"[222]. It has been demonstrated how the *fragment* is capable of articulating the Literary Absolute of romanticism, and, in this regard, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy add that "only a single ensemble, published with the one-word title *Fragments*, corresponds entirely...to the fragmentary ideal of romanticism, notably in that it has no particular object and in that it is anonymously composed of pieces by several different authors"[223].

What we find in the case of the Jena romantics' 'sympoetry' is far more than an idealised community or an artistic collective, but the fragmentation of structure or order, and therefore also of genre, which in the same move is the recapitulation of this *genre beyond genre* as the absolute genre and also the absolute of genre. Now, it has already been noted that definite analogies may be drawn between romanticism as a theoretical project, and postmodernism, and in this aspect of poetry, the analogy finds an interesting development. In his essay, *The Secret History of the Sign*, *LANGUAGE* poet, Barrett Watten, undertakes an incisive study of the implications of this communal form of composition. He discusses several texts in some detail, but for the purposes of the current discussion, the insights he provides regarding *Legend* (a text composed by leading

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[221] The term L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E will henceforth be written *LANGUAGE* except when explicit reference is made to the journal $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ from which the movement derives its name. This group of poets emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century as a radical application of the surge of deconstructive philosophy, and is partly a development of many of the more radical Concrete poets whose work was particularly *en vogue* in the 1950s.

[222] Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. p45.

[223] *Ibid.* p40.

LANGUAGE poets Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, Ray DiPalma, Steve McCaffery and Ron Silliman) will be sufficient.

Legend is comprised of various structural elements which reach for a similar degree of equivocity and fragmentation as that sought by the Jena romantics. Watten provides the following summary:

> *(1) single-authored statements (one per author, each exactly one hundred lines), (2) texts by two or three authors exploring specific modes of writing arrived at in the process of dialogic improvisation, and (3) a multiauthored collaboration that repeats the total form of the work in its final section*[224].

The method of *Legend* seems to surpass, in its indeterminate or equivocal appeal, the *Fragments* of the Jena romantics, which is perhaps not surprising given the pressure placed both by and on *avant-garde* artists within the currency of contemporary literary discourse. This equivocity results in a condition in which "individual interests bound up in a group dynamic of radical tendency...may move toward a horizon of either dissolution or redefinition"[225]. When we consider even a very small section of *Legend*, it soon becomes apparent which of these two activities dominates this sympoetic enterprise:

> *things category/ French phenomena/ billow reader/ Egyptian echo-chamber/ aaaaaa aaaaaaaaeeeeee eeeeeeeeei iiiii iiiiii pppppppp uuuuuuuuuuuu/ helium absent/ volition stychomythic/ relent adoration/ menace tribunes*[226].

One cannot but be reminded of the project in literature, which is, of course, also a project in language in its broader sense, opened up by the early postmodern *avant-garde*, particularly in James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. From Ihab Hassan, it would appear that Joyce's later work is not only postmodern[227], but also involved in "invent[ing] language

[224] Watten, B. 1999. 'The Secret History of the Equal Sign: *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* between Discourse and Text'. In *Poetics Today*. Volume 20, Number 4. Winter 1999. p597.
[225] *Ibid*. p597.
[226] Extract from *Legend* section 15 (Bernstein, DiPalma, Andrews). In Watten, B. 1999. 'The Secret History of the Equal Sign: *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* between Discourse and Text'. In *Poetics Today*. Volume 20, Number 4. Winter 1999. p610.
[227] Hassan, I. 1995. 'Joyce, Beckett, and the Postmodern Imagination'. In *Rumors of Change: Essays of Five Decades*. p112.

anew and mak[ing] over the universe in parts of speech"[228]. But it should also be noted that "the monstrous effort of *Finnegan's Wake* strains, beyond its puns and infinite sounds, beyond its noise, toward a region of articulate silence"[229].

When considering the extract quoted above, it is clear that a similar reinvention of language is undertaken. The first four lines present an explicitly dense linguistic construction – "things category/ French phenomena/ billow reader/ Egyptian echo-chamber". The meanings which could emerge from a close analysis of just these lines are numerous. For example, "things category" appears to indicate something of the linguistic category of the object, as well as an indication of the way objects are conventionally categorised as such in language, and in this sense it is both a demonstration of a *things category* and the naming of the category. And what are we to make of the expression "French phenomena" which, in its consecutive position to "things category", suggests a linguistic, if not directly semantic, relationship? Is this a trace of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, a comment on the formation of the "things category", or the objective category through an act of perception, to recall Merleau-Ponty's assertion[230]? Perhaps, the phrase is more general, referring to a plethora of French phenomena, philosophical and otherwise. William Lavender clearly identifies *LANGUAGE* poetry's agenda with "a way of reading...a certain critical stance...[that] stems directly from the sudden influx to America of continental critical thought"[231], the bulk of which was French.

This kind of argument, the analysis of content and meaning, could be continued for some length regarding any one of the phrases of much *LANGUAGE* poetry, but bears little fruit outside of a certain sense of critical gamesmanship. It is precisely against this normative, homogenising process that this group was writing and continues to write. What is more significant is the line of repeated letters ("aaaaaa aaaaaaaaeeeeee eeeeeeeei iiiii iiiiii pppppppp uuuuuuuuuuuu"), which may either be read as nothing resembling a phonetic

[228] *Ibid.* p103.
[229] *Ibid.* p106.
[230] See page 6 and note 14 of part one.
[231] Lavender, W. 1996. 'Disappearance of Theory, Appearance of Praxis: Ron Silliman,
L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, and the Essay'. In *Poetics Today*. Volume 17, Number 2. Summer 1996. p195.

utterance, or as an amorphous and incompletely articulated sequence of signifiers of sound. Although this may be the sound of the "Egyptian echo-chamber", the proverbial tomb of language which is entered through the poetic expectation that lines operate consecutively, at least one other possible interpretation emerges in the idea of interruption. Such an interruption functions as a reminder of the emptiness of the objects which precede it, and calls attention to the arbitrariness of the construction of the object. If this is the case, this line proves to be a demonstration of the code of language as a code, which is, of course, a principal technique in reaching for minimum. But, it remains sequential, in that it follows and precedes units which suggest a fragmented syntax. It may be a demonstration of how this *law of consecution* is invalid in current poetry, but it nonetheless constructs this criticism within the same law that it criticises.

To return to an earlier distinction between "dissolution or redefinition"[232] in the work of the *LANGUAGE* poets, it appears that although a radical amount of dissolution takes place in the formal procedures adopted by these poets, the dissolution remains incomplete (and perhaps necessarily so) – the poetic discourse does not exit the overarching system of poetry, the *law of consecution* represented by the line-break – and consequently is involved in the reconstitution of the poem as subject. Of course, co-authorship complicates this equation considerably, to the extent that Watten is able to claim the following concerning *Legend*:

> *This shattering of the positing subject creates a space of negativity that may be identified as the Utopian space of language – an opening of unconscious processes in language that evokes the necessary conditions for a repositioning of subjects in a form of community. Legend's Utopian community, then, starts with the dismantling of the...positing subject and ends in an intersubjective horizon that is the realization of its form of multiauthorship*[233].

In other words, the principal implication of sympoetry is not the abandonment of the System of the Subject, but the fracturing and subsequent reconstitution of the position of the subject within the same system. I would suggest that this recapitulation to the subject occurs precisely as a result of the *LANGUAGE* poets' return to genre, to the romantic

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[232] Watten, B. 1999. 'The Secret History of the Equal Sign: $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ between Discourse and Text'. In *Poetics Today*. Volume 20, Number 4. Winter 1999. p597.
[233] *Ibid.* p605.

notion of a sympoetic genre as a fragmentary genre, which although it represents a decisive fracture or break, does not escape the question of authority or subjecthood within discourse. For sympoetry to succeed as an approach to minimum, an *a priori* consensus needs to be reached that language is the master of the subject, rather than the subject as the author of language. Although many critics would disagree, the sympoetic device of *Legend* fails to convince in this regard, precisely because even the radical fragmentation of the positing or authorial subject reinvests itself in the notion of *Law* (which is the power of the subject), when it reconstitutes the authority of the subject as an intersubjective presence. The *presence* of authority in discourse is that same illusion of origin of which minimalism emerges as a most radical and provocative critique. And, in this light, it is clear that *LANGUAGE* sympoetry is inscribed in the same necessary radical failure embodied by the *il y a*, or the necessity of Orpheus' turning back and gazing at the primordial darkness of the night in Blanchot's *The Gaze of Orpheus*[234].

Minimalism requires a more thorough structural fracturing than that offered by the figures of authority which impose themselves, that is, impose their fragmentary subjectivity, in *Legend*. However, the *LANGUAGE* movement may not be so easily dismissed. In what follows, it will be argued that, despite the failure of sympoetry to unwork the System of the Subject, presenting itself instead as fragmentation followed by a necessary *reworking* of the subject as intersubject, *LANGUAGE* poetry is nonetheless involved in a radical activity which may, *in some cases*, be considered homologous to the operation described in the second part of this study as the Minimalist Sublime.

II.

In order to investigate the relationship between literary minimalism and *LANGUAGE* poetry, it is necessary to establish the principal aesthetic assertions of the *LANGUAGE* movement. In Ron Silliman's *Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World*,

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[234] Blanchot, M. 1981. 'The Gaze of Orpheus'. In *The Gaze of Orpheus*. Translated by L. Davis. p99.

which Lavender identifies as one of the chief manifestos of the *LANGUAGE* poets[235], we encounter the principal assertion of *LANGUAGE* poetry in the following prescriptions:

> *(1) Recognition of the historic nature and structure of referentiality, (2) placing the issue of language, the repressed element, at the center of the program, and (3) placing the program into the context of conscious class struggle. Such poetry will take as its motto the words of Marx...'The social revolution...cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future'*[236]

According to Silliman, "the stage of historical development determines the *natural laws*...of poetry...and the natural laws of language"[237], with the result that the dominant currency of poetry owes its origins and explanation to a capitalist "commodity fetish"[238] according to which language, as an exposed medium with no necessarily binding ties to *meaning*, as such, undergoes an "anaesthetic transformation of the perceived tangibility of the word, with the corresponding increases in its descriptive and narrative capacities, preconditions for the invention of 'realism', the optical illusion of reality in capitalist thought"[239]. In other words, Silliman introduces into the formation of the System of the Subject, the ever-present question of politics, which, for reasons of space, have been largely avoided in the present discussion. To touch briefly on some of his key concerns, according to Silliman's model, the economy of language which enables us to construe 'reality' from linguistic formations or utterances, is the same power which effaces, conceals, and, in an appropriate pun, *anaesthetises* our experience of language *as language*.

Regardless of whether or not we accept Silliman's prescriptions in this regard, it is clear that the structure of reality has an inherently political dimension and that language is a language not only of ontology, but also of ethics and politics. From this recognition, Silliman claims that the development of 'reality' is "tied directly to the nature of reference in language, which under capitalism is transformed (deformed) into

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[235] Lavender, W. 1996. 'Disappearance of Theory, Appearance of Praxis: Ron Silliman,
L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, and the Essay'. In *Poetics Today*. Volume 17, Number 2. Summer 1996. p188.
[236] Silliman, R. 1977. 'Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World'. In *The
L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. 1984. Edited by B. Andrews & C. Bernstein. p131.
[237] *Ibid*. p122.
[238] *Ibid*. p122.
[239] *Ibid*. p125.

referentiality"[240]. In prescribing a poetics which re-centres language, Silliman's poetics emerges as a Utopian vision of a non-representational ethical poetry which surpasses the negative social implications of capitalism and reemerges as a pure "gestural poetry"[241].

Now, however noble Silliman's project seems to be, it is limited, for what Utopian dream is not already dependent on the inherent referentiality of the System of the Subject? In essence, what we find reemerging under the guise of a political poetics is the same desire to overcome the negative foundations of language and, hence, to overcome the conditions of nihilism, which, as we have seen repeatedly, is impossible and represents a major failure of much contemporary philosophy and literature. Bearing this reaffirmation of the power of the human spirit to overcome, which is a failure to recognise the overarching and inescapable atmosphere of the *il y a*, Lavender's argument concerning the status of *critique* within the *LANGUAGE* movement is of prime importance.

According to Lavender, it is the tendency to produce manifestos that places the radical project of the *LANGUAGE* poets in doubt. In this regard, Lavender takes particular note of Charles Bernstein's review of Baudrillards's *The Mirror of Production*[242], in which Bernstein offers a critique of Baudrillard's critique of Marx. Bernstein points out that a critique cannot suitably criticise another critique when it is couched in the same language or linguistic set of privileges as that which it criticises, which he claims is the case in Baudrillard's study of Marx. Of course, Bernstein falls prey to the same rhetorical and generic trap, and so a situation emerges in which "the writer, hypnotized by the codes, disappears, as the functional discourse obsessively seeks out its origin and then disguises it as an other simply by speaking in the third person"[243]. Based on this argument, Lavender is able to conclude that the *LANGUAGE* movement fails to take into account the fact that their proposed fusion of theory and practice in the *centring of language* (to

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[240] *Ibid.* p125.
[241] *Ibid.* p126.
[242] Bernstein, C. 1983. 'The Stadium of Explanation'. In *Code of Signals: Recent Writings in Poetics*. Edited by M. Palmer. pp292-293.
[243] Lavender, W. 1996. 'Disappearance of Theory, Appearance of Praxis: Ron Silliman, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, and the Essay'. In *Poetics Today*. Volume 17, Number 2. Summer 1996. p199.

recontextualise Silliman's terminology[244]) necessarily involves the "depolarization of theory and practice, by means of the problematization of genre"[245], which occurs as a result of the observation that "the essays of the Language poets are deployed in the same arena as the poetry"[246].

However, this last assertion is somewhat dubious. Firstly, the journal $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$, although it is admittedly a forum largely intended for the theoretical and critical opinions of poets and artists, does not overtly claim to the be the so-called 'companion volume' to the work of the poets in question. In this regard, Watten observes that "it is important to note that the graphically modified noun *language* was used to name a journal that published *about* language-centred writing...rather than examples *of* it"[247]. So clearly, one has a critical decision to take which will radically alter the possible reading of *LANGUAGE* poetry as minimalist work: either one sees the explosion of critical writing in $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ as inseparable from the theory-practice principle central to the movement, or one considers the poetry itself as the demonstration of this fusion, and the writing in $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ as related but non-identical. Watten suggests the following:

> $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ *stood as a name for a literature that could be represented but only indirectly presented, in a threefold sense: examples of language-centered writing itself were not the primary content of the journal; articles about language-centered writing were not identical to their referents, even if the horizon was implied where sign and referent would meet; therefore, the name of the aesthetic tendency that produced this referential schism would partake of the nonreferentiality of the work itself*[248].

A possible resolution to the crisis occasioned by this impending critical decision is provided by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy in relation to the Jena romantics, who remind us that according to the precepts exposed in the *Athenaeum*, "'poetry can only be criticised through poetry'...in this respect, the definition of criticism could easily be extended,

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[244] Silliman, R. 1977. 'Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World'. In *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. 1984. Edited by B. Andrews & C. Bernstein. p131.

[245] Lavender, W. 1996. 'Disappearance of Theory, Appearance of Praxis: Ron Silliman, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, and the Essay'. In *Poetics Today*. Volume 17, Number 2. Summer 1996. p183.

[246] *Ibid.* p185.

[247] Watten, B. 1999. 'The Secret History of the Equal Sign: *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* between Discourse and Text'. In *Poetics Today*. Volume 20, Number 4. Winter 1999. p586.

[248] *Ibid.* p586.

formally at least, to include that of 'transcendental poetry' itself, which is defined as the 'poetry of poetry'"[249]. In this statement we encounter a principle similar to the one proposed by Watten in the quotation above. In both cases, the poem emerges as the praxis of theory and practice, and poetry is inaugurated as the self-reflexive ideal of the fusion of the two, the place where "criticism [is situated] simultaneously in the space of 'auto-illumination' of the beautiful work and in the space, in every work, of the absence of the Work"[250]. If *LANGUAGE* poetry proves capable of producing this position, it is quite possible that we may identify within its operation a radical delineation of the lacuna of the space of dying, of the establishment of that essential negativity in the positivity of general discourse which is the only approach to the impossibility of minimum.

III.

Beyond these problems of the relationship between representation and presentation, what are the principal characteristics of *LANGUAGE* poetry? According to Steven Connor, the principal aim of these poets is "to reaffirm the historical materiality of words in a culture that consistently ignores and effaces this materiality"[251]. We find, of course, numerous echoes of this assertion in the writing included in $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$, and, certainly, Silliman's call for "placing the issue of language, the repressed element, at the center of the program"[252] echoes this assertion. It would appear that the question of *language* in *LANGUAGE* poetry is nothing other than the question of the code of language, which was earlier identified as one of the primary modes of presentation of literary minimalism[253].

In addition to focusing on the *centring* of language, *LANGUAGE* poetry proposes that this action occurs as a fusion of theory and practice, and that the place of the fusion is

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[249] Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. p105.
[250] *Ibid*. p105.
[251] Connor, S. 1989. *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*. p121.
[252] Silliman, R. 1977. 'Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World'. In *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. 1984. Edited by B. Andrews & C. Bernstein. p131.
[253] See pages 78-80.

ideally conceived in the genre of the poem reconstituted as the *absolute of genre*. We have also seen how the sympoetry of *LANGUAGE* collaborations such as *Legend* attempts to "reconfigure[...] the politics of authorship in a form of collective practice"[254], thereby dispersing the work of the subject, although in this particular case the result is ultimately a reconfiguration of authority *within* the System of the Subject, and not as the delineation of its boundaries, as is required by a rigorous minimalist aesthetic. Watten further identifies specific techniques such as "a deliberate undermining of local coherence...[a] refusal of sentence boundary, numbered framing, or punctuation"[255] and "an expansive and dissociative textuality that breaks down the moment of positing in fragments of nonsignifying material language"[256].

The question, then, is to what degree these techniques of *LANGUAGE* poetry coincide with the characteristics of the minimalist literary object argued earlier. Firstly, we find that minimalism is able to operate both *within and outside of* the System of the Subject by virtue of its sublime constitution as both the totality of discourse (on condition that discourse remains the proverbial 'master of nothing') and the absence of totality (for what is the 'master of nothing', other than the absence of totality?)[257]. Placed within McLuhan's model of reality as constituted by the imbrication of media, the minimalist literary object emerges as the search within discourse for the deconstruction of all discourse, or minimum, and from this position, the minimalist literary instance emerges as the inscription of the medium of discourse (language) at its most elementary level[258]. This might include the following: the presentation of isolated and, through this position of fracture, dysfunctional phonemes[259]; isolated letters or alphabetic symbols (which can be said to be elements of language divorced from their functionality, hence unworked)[260]; the incorporation of a radical reconsideration of blank space, or the negative space of

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[254] Watten, B. 1999. 'The Secret History of the Equal Sign: *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* between Discourse and Text'. In *Poetics Today*. Volume 20, Number 4. Winter 1999. p596.
[255] *Ibid*. p602.
[256] *Ibid*. p620.
[257] See pages 74-75.
[258] See page 78.
[259] See page 79.
[260] See page 79.

writing[261]; the inclusion of symbols which appear to function iconically, but which actually do not[262].

It would seem that both *LANGUAGE* poetry and the theory of minimalism posited in the present study, coincide in the demand by both for a reconsideration of the traditional constitution of literary discourse as a law of consecution and representation. We have already seen that it would be highly problematic to consider the *LANGUAGE* poetry movement as a minimalist movement. It has already been demonstrated that *Legend*'s intersubjectivity amounts to a dispersion rather than an unworking of the subject, and Connor also counts "puns and wordplay"[263], which are very traditional rhetorical devices for establishing language as subject, amongst *LANGUAGE* poetry's techniques. This does not suggest, however, that it is impossible to identify instances of minimalist literary objecthood, whether accidental or intentional, within the general boundaries of the *LANGUAGE* movement. It is to these *instances* that the following and final paragraphs of the present study are devoted.

IV.

Perhaps the most comprehensive and revolutionary unworking of the genre of poetry, and with it the overall genre of literature as a principle of order, is to be found in the work of the Concrete poets. Although Concrete poetry constitutes a separate and distinguishable poetic sub-genre, the similarities of intention between many of the works of *LANGUAGE* and Concrete poets are numerous enough to justify a brief *excursus*. In general, Concrete poetry is characterised by an attempt on the part of the poet to shift the focus of the reader from the assumed metaphysical content of poetry to its actual physical presentation as a poem. It manifested in two major branches, *visual* and *sound* poetry[264].

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[261] See page 79.
[262] See pages 79-80.
[263] Connor, S. 1989. *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*. p121.
[264] Scobie, S. 1997. *Earthquakes and Explorations: Language and Painting from Cubism to Concrete Poetry*. p145.

Stephen Scobie highlights the interesting position Concrete poetry occupies on the cusp between modernism and postmodernism, identifying *simultanism* and *synchronism* as two of this poetry's characteristics which are most easily associable with modernist and structuralist thought[265]. According to Scobie's report of Shattcuck[266], simultanism is similar to the modernist juxtaposition, the placing together of different items without logical connectors. Concrete poetry's discarding of syntax – the removal of logical connectors between words – mirrors the techniques of the *LANGUAGE* poets engaged to reconstitute language rather than representation, as the central issue of literary discourse. In a non-syntactic poetry such as that explored by many Concrete and *LANGUAGE* poets, the adequacy of traditional literary discourse and its structures is immediately called into question, focusing the reader's attention on the text itself, beyond its symbolic function.

In practical terms, simultanism usually involves the combination of this linguistic juxtaposition and the physical layout of the text, which is usually presented on a single page, calling to attention the immediacy of the incorporation of content and real space, that is, the simultaneity of the concept of the text with real space. In his short essay *Pattern Poems*, Dick Higgins, a celebrated *avant-gardist*, identifies in visual poetry (one of the two main branches of Concrete poetry) the "concept of language as sign rather than semantic process"[267]. If the language of Concrete poetry can be considered a sign, then it is because such composition would echo the immediacy which is noted in Scobie under the term *simultanism*.

In relation to visual Concrete poetry, Scobie notes that "concrete poetry, as a synchronic structure creating metaphors out of the relationship between spatially distributed elements, can further be related to structuralism"[268]. By synchronism, Scobie means the Jakobsonian structuralist distinction between metaphor as spatial and vertical, as opposed to metonymy as temporal and horizontal. In making this specific reference, Scobie

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[265] *Ibid.* pp146-149.
[266] Shattcuck, R. In Scobie, S. 1997. *Earthquakes and Explorations: Language and Painting from Cubism to Concrete Poetry.* p147.
[267] Higgins, D. 1978. 'Pattern Poems'. In *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book.* 1984. Edited by B. Andrews & C. Bernstein. p86.
[268] Scobie, S. 1997. *Earthquakes and Explorations: Language and Painting from Cubism to Concrete Poetry.* p148.

suggests that the visual and non-syntactic elements of Concrete poetry focus the perceiver's attention on the whole of the work in question – its vertical aspects, its structural relations – rather than its diachronic content or *meaning*. Yet, the structure of Concrete poetry is such that neither the visual nor the linguistic elements dominate. As Dick Higgins warns: "If we try to claim excellence for a pattern poem because of its language, we get into trouble immediately...If we try to claim excellence because of the visual quality of a piece, we get into almost as much trouble"[269].

A suitably minimalist example of visual Concrete poetry emerges in Emmett Williams' pattern poem, *like attracts like*[270] (see Appendix A). The poem is written in the shape of the letter *v*. It consists of thirteen repetitions of the line *like attracts like*, the font remaining consistent throughout in terms of design and size. The word *attracts* is centred in each line, with the two identical words, *like*, appearing equidistant on either side of *attracts*, starting fairly far from the word *attracts* and moving closer together with each new line until the three words are completely overlaid, the two *likes* completely occupying the space of the word *attracts*.

Considered in the light of Higgins' statement – which specifically implies an equality between the visual and linguistic elements of the poem, which combine to draw attention to the poem as a self-contained, holistic product – *like attracts like* clearly engages the Concrete aesthetic most effectively. Certainly, the poem is self-reflexive, it enacts its own prescription – in the successive repetitions of *like attracts like*, the words *like* move progressively closer together. While syntactically the poem makes perfect auto-productive and auto-reflexive sense, it presents a semantic subversion, since the phrase generally accepted as true (that is, scientifically true) reads '*opposites attract*'.

Now, there are several reasons why Williams might affect this semantic distortion. Firstly, the word *like* has four letters, which, when doubled, equals the number of letters

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[269] Higgins, D. 1989. 'Pattern Poetry as Paradigm'. In *Poetics Today*. Volume 10, Number 2. Summer 1989. pp403-404.
[270] Williams, E. 1958. *like attracts like*. In Higgins, D. 1989. 'Pattern Poetry as Paradigm'. In *Poetics Today*. Volume 10, Number 2. Summer 1989. p410.

in the word *attracts*, which means that the words may be perfectly spatially overlaid at the end of the poem, whereas this would obviously not work in the case of *opposite*. Moreover, an explicit aim of Concrete poetry emerges in the undermining of traditional poetic content, in shifting the reader's attention to the materiality of the text, which this self-fulfilling linguistic prescription certainly achieves.

In this poem, we are immediately confronted with a paradox typical of an operation such as the romantic Literary Absolute or the Minimalist Sublime. The poem is clearly literary, since it consists of words, whole words which *mean something* and are found very frequently in conventional discourse. Furthermore, these words, as they appear in line one and are reinforced by successive repetitions, *do work*, that is they are active, subjects, and moreover, auto-productive and auto-reflexive subjects. It is possible to come to this conclusion on account of the fact that the line *like attracts like* inscribes its own spatial and temporal operation. In terms of space, the words *like* actually do move closer together, and this within a representational time which is enabled by the literary *law of consecution*, which suggests that when we read from top to bottom of a page, time passes. Thus, we may determine that the words *like* move closer together by a certain self-constituting literary operation.

At this point, however, the relation of the poem to minimalism becomes problematic, for if the work is auto-productive, then it is the power of language which is producing. This power is nothing other than the power of the subject, the power of construction with which language is thoroughly imbued as the privileged medium of the System of the Subject. In the case of the romantic fragment, this 'auto' function is enabled structurally – in other words, the fragment speaks its fragmentation by fragmenting, or, a disruption in discourse is exhibited by the method of presenting the fragment as simultaneously a part of a whole, and yet also wholeness in itself, the fragment as a genre of completion. Within the patterns of discourse, the romantic fragment is able to constitute itself as an unworking of discourse.

The paradox emerges: we have seen that the power of the subject emerges clearly in *like attracts like*, but, as will subsequently be demonstrated, discourse functions, or perhaps malfunctions, in this poem in a manner homologous to the romantic fragment. On the one hand, the poem seems dominated by the semantic prescription of its language, since each repetition enacts the statement *like attracts like*, as the two words *like* move closer together. But by the time we reach the eighth line, the words begin to overlap. Their semantic element begins to weaken as their structure as individual words begins to dissolve into a blur, which, although it can still be broadly recognised as comprised of letters (the basic code of language) is certainly not part of a discourse. By the time we reach the last line, the original words are largely unrecognisable – it is only be virtue of the modular repetition (a spatial subtractive repetition) that we are able to recognise these as the words *like* and *attract*. In this way, *like attracts like* represents a radical unworking of discourse from within discourse. The work presents itself as a poem, but with each successive line, the genre in unworked. Language, the active subject, does the work of its own unworking.

The poet, as figure of authority, is virtually effaced in such an austerely self-reflexive work which eschews all referentiality or representation in favour of a self-contained motion. *Like attracts like* presents itself in the irreducible paradox which constitutes the minimalist literary object, an inherently open system, for it is literary, enacting its progressive closure. As the poem, a genre of discourse, does work, it unworks its ability to do work, it reaches for that which lies beyond the subject. But, unable to accomplish this it occupies a position which is both within the System of the Subject, yet not properly part of the same system, a presentation of that promising paradox which is the delineation of the conditions of nihilism as they appear to us in discourse.

The innovations introduced by the visual Concrete poets were continued by many members of the *LANGUAGE* group, possibly most notable amongst whom is Charles Bernstein (co-editor of the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*). One particular untitled

poem[271] (see Appendix B) by Bernstein merits further consideration. This particular piece is a hand-written work presented on a single page. Words seem arbitrarily overlaid and the text is largely illegible – after some time I have been able to decipher only a few words, amongst them "clean", "breath" (I think), "as", "the" – but, although the text remains illegible and largely unintelligible, it is clear that it consists of writing, accompanied by a complex matrix of scratches, deletions and arbitrary marks.

What we find in this particular example, is a writing, an inscription, which clearly has a physical manifestation and which furthermore inscribes itself as a poetic inscription. However, all aspects of traditional poetry are conspicuously absent. This then, is a presentation of the condition I referred to earlier as the minimalist requirement of the presentation within discourse, of that which is simultaneously an unworking or a radical deconstruction of discourse. When considering the few words which can be deciphered from the poem, they prove to be empty signs, words which appear to function iconically but, stripped of any context other than the fact that they are presented as poetry in its broadest possible aspect, are radically dysfunctional icons. We encounter that which appears to be language, functioning non-linguistically, for what conclusion is it possible to draw from Bernstein's presentation? Perhaps this is a commentary on the cognitive and socio-cognitive construction of meaning, or perhaps it is a page from a notepad used as blotting-paper. As absurd as this juxtaposition may seem, we are ultimately left with pure conjecture, and what this implies for the current study is that Bernstein's untitled work is involved in a disengagement of the reader, in the imbrication of codes which constitute discourse and, at the same time, an exposition of the elementary codes of writing *as code*.

In other words, this untitled poem is involved in a radical approach to *minimum* – that place of impossibility which can never be reached but always only approached, a place guessed at only through a sublime negation. It is of lesser significance whether or not Bernstein intended to write a minimalist piece, although it is undoubtedly situated in a radical reappropriation of language as an independent medium, for this is the principal

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[271] Bernstein, C. 1980. 'Untitled Poem' from *Trumps: A Periodical of Postcards*. In *The Line in Postmodern Poetry*. 1988. Edited by R. Frank & H. Sayre. p179.

aim of the *LANGUAGE* poets. Remembering that our inability to *say yes* to nihilism has been demonstrated repeatedly in earlier argumentation, the question which Bernstein's piece poses is the following: if it is impossible to say yes to nihilism, does this mean that we cannot say no to discourse or the System of the Subject? From within the System of the Subject, this inscription of *no* is impossible, but as the unworking or delineation of this same system, we encounter the radical possibility of impossibility, or the minimalist inscription of *no*. And this is precisely the space which Bernstein's untitled poem occupies by deconstructing the same space – the inscription of *no to discourse* from within its presentation *as discourse*, which is, of course, a super-generic inscription: in short, a minimalist inscription.

To diverge briefly: the sound poetry of the Concrete movement seems actively to harness the deconstructive notion of the play of sound and writing in the field of *differrance*[272]. The structures explored by these poets tend to be broadly temporal rather than spatial, relying heavily on performance rather than print, and consequently can be considered a recall to the *phonocentric* privilege Derrida criticises. In this regard, *LANGUAGE* poet Steve McCaffery notes that "when considering text-sound it is energy, not semantically shaped meaning, that constitutes the essence of communicated data"[273]. From this idea of an energy-exchange which constitutes the basis for discourse, which is in itself quite plausible, McCaffery goes on to suggest that "sound poetry is much more than simply returning language to its own matter; it is an agency for desire production, for releasing energy flow"[274]. But, what this model (which is heavily indebted to psychoanalytic thought) fails to take into account, is that a so-called return of language to its own matter, is merely a linguistic inscription of energy release, which makes this assertion somewhat tautologous – the power of language from its simplest to its most complex imbrication of media, is the power of acting, the working of a kinetic energy.

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[272] Storey, J. 2001. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. pp73-74.
[273] McCaffery, S. 1978. 'Sound Poetry'. In *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. 1984. Edited by B. Andrews & C. Bernstein. p88.
[274] *Ibid*. p88.

McCaffery goes on to identify the following as both the conscious and tacit agenda of sound poetry:

> To align, realign and misalign within the anarchy of language. To cultivate excess, return language to its somatic base in order to deterioize the sign...Cuttings. Fissures. Decompositions (inventions). Not intention so much as intensions. Plasticizations. Non-functionalities. Shattered sphericities. Marginalities. Somas. Nexi. La poème c'est moi but as the inscription of the person in a transcendental pronoun that utterly annihilates the subject. Personal collapse into flux. Dilations. Positive disintegrations[275].

Evident in this quotation are both elements which support and disqualify the association of sound poetry with minimalism. On the one hand, the "deterioliz[ation] of the sign", "shattered sphericities" and "marginalities", are central to the minimalist programme, but at the same time, McCaffery claims that these are accomplished by an appeal to a "transcendental subject that utterly annihilates the subject". He is able to deduce from this position that sound poetry exists as a "positive disintegration[...]". Now, as we have seen repeatedly, the conditions of *Dasein*, through discourse, enclosed by the atmosphere of the *il y a*, refuse us such a simplistic transcendental pronoun. In a sense the *there* of *there is*, is transcendental, but its transcendentality is inscribed in impossibility – the impossibility of either complete absence or complete presence, and in this way we are always drawn back to Being. In a similar way, there can be no annihilation of the subject, precisely because the *il y a* is our primary and always already present/absent reminder that there can be no annihilation except by the power of the subject, because the subject, as it is exposed through the present argumentation of the System of the Subject, is nothing other than the principle of power, flux or action. Thus, the "positive disintegration", while it may represent a significant move within the System of the Subject, is certainly not of the minimalist order, since it is nothing other than a reinforcement of the 'reality' (the *real* power, or the *positive* power) of the system as it is constructed through discourse.

The French poet François Dufrêne is identified by McCaffery as having "pushed the limits"[276] of sound poetry considerably. However, when we consider his poem *Hurly-*

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[275] *Ibid.* p88.
[276] *Ibid.* p90.

Burlyric Rock, a poem composed in English, it is difficult to see how Dufrêne's work can be considered minimalist in any way. Rather, it would seem that sound poetry, certainly as it is presented in this particular poem, is far more closely associable with stream-of-consciousness techniques and psychoanalytic word association, than with any radical ontological project. Consider the following lines:

Bamboozle zula benzoline/ Ooze hullabaloo benzoin/ Crambo bowling limbo Boing[277];

Germany many germinate/ Forget me not far gate minute/ Does he mean it? Mimoun in tow/ Memento moon Ho-Chi-Mintho[278].

Clearly, there is little erasure or annihilation of the subject at work here – virtually every word has a sound-relationship with its preceding word which can only be cognitively determined as English spelling is certainly not phonetic. What we find, then, is an expressionistic work evoking a chaotic matrix of language and meaning, but an overtly referential one, filled with geographical allusions, rather quaint and seldom-used English phrases (such as "hullabaloo"), and a definite sense of work being done.

The failure of this particular sound poem to approach minimum, illustrates the implicit difficulty of associating sound poetry with minimalism. This difficulty lies, firstly, in the fact that sound poetry demonstrates a definite *phonocentric* bias which is problematic in the light of the deconstructive project which aims to destabilise the structurality of both *phonocentrism* and *logocentrism*. Secondly, such sound poems tend to focus on the sounds of actual words, in an attempt to liberate some mystical energy which, in the estimation of McCaffery, cannot but be liberated in any case. If sound poetry is to succeed as an approach to minimum, it needs to discard entirely the structures of language, and present isolated non-syntactic, non-lexical phonemes – a far more radical deconstruction of language than the majority of sound poets have undertaken. And then, it is debatable whether this may be called sound poetry, since divorced from speech,

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[277] Dufrêne, F. 1964. Excerpt from 'Hurly-Burlyric Rock'. In *French Writing Today*. Edited by S.W. Taylor. p327.
[278] *Ibid*. p328.

indeed from language as anything other than (apparently) arbitrary inscription, its relationship to sound would require an assumption demonstrative of *phonocentric* bias.

In attempting to avoid this problematic situation, many *LANGUAGE* poets have sought a solution in mathematics. As we have seen in Samuel Beckett's writing, the use of mathematics emerges as an attempt to re-inscribe the incontestable *logos* to dominate discourse[279]. In Robert Grenier's poem, *Bach Five*[280], for instance, the numbers *1, 2, 3, 4, 5* are repeated sequentially. The poem consists of five stanzas of four lines each containing this sequence, with the exception of the last line of the second stanza which contains only the spelt-out word *one*. What we find here is the quasi-linguistic imitation of expanding modular repetition characteristic of much Minimalist music, since, although the sequence is repeated twenty times, there are certain additive and subtractive features which deserve mention. In lines 3, 5, 6, 7, 11, 13, 14, 15 and 16, Grenier includes the symbol &, which is not only a visible addition to the text, but suggests both an arithmetic and linguistic addition of the lines which follow. Further additive substitutions are made in lines 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20, in which one or more of the mathematical numbers is replaced by the conventional linguistic form (one, two, three, etc.), as well as the word *and* which appears at the end of lines 12, 17, 18 and 19.

According to Grenier's introductory note to the work, it is based on an attempt to "'follow'/'transcribe' the sarabande in Bach's Suite For Unaccompanied Cello in C-Minor…but 'the line' is devoured by the consuming desire to translate all that had been propounded in music, in numbers, in language, in letters"[281]. If this is the case, then the power of the subject, as in the case of Beckett's work, still dominates the language of mathematics, even though the subject is infinite, dispersed and represented in the System of the Subject. In other words, the need to translate, the compulsion to do work (which is the compulsion of language, the same as the compulsion to go on speaking) dominates the attempt to produce, through mathematics, a metalanguage which can dominate both

[279] See pages 138-139.
[280] Grenier, R. 1988. 'Bach Five' from *Line*. In *The Line in Postmodern Poetry*. 1988. Edited by R. Frank & H. Sayre. pp212-213.
[281] *Ibid.* p211.

music and the need to speak. And in this light, Grenier must fail as a minimalist, although his poem succeeds in demonstrating the centrality of language, the professed aim of the *LANGUAGE* movement.

V.

In the unworking of the genre of poetry, the possibility of minimalism – which is the presentation of the impossibility of minimum, but an eternal approach to this concept – emerges as a viable aesthetic stance. Perhaps we could say that the reconstitution of poetry as the absolute genre, as a genre beyond genre, and therefore the unworking of genre, which is the project opened up by romanticism and continued in much *LANGUAGE* poetry, finds a plausible development in minimalism. Although the majority of *LANGUAGE* poetry maintains its umbilical connection to the System of the Subject, reinvesting the power of the subject in the work of language (the power which is the work of language), minimalism does emerge as a possibility in that certain poems offer a radical and deconstructive auto-presentation, an unworking of discourse which was identified earlier as our only plausible approach within the System of the Subject to the irresolvable alterity of the System of the Object.

The possibility of a minimalist poetry as founded in inconclusion, indeterminacy and equivocity, is presented in its structural (or deconstructive) recognition of Levinas' observation concerning the *il y a*, that "anything can count for anything else"[282]. In minimalist poetry the code which constitutes poetry is thrown into a radical insecurity and, thus, it is only by force of habit that we call these works *poetry*, a habit which involves recognising anything that is conventionally unrecognisable as *something poetic*, or containing something of the mysterious *spirit of poetry*. The result is works which are nominally literary or generic, but which are characterised by an unworking of the

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[282] Levinas, E. 1989. 'There is: Existence without Existents'. In *The Levinas Reader*. Edited by S. Hand. p31. It is worthwhile adding that while the *il y a* is not reducible to the literary instance, the literary construction of the sublime is capable of producing, paradoxically, at least a contingent exteriority to Being, and this is precisely the infinite operation I have identified as the Minimalist Sublime.

elements of literature, which then present themselves as arbitrary codes, disconnected from discourse as a whole.

We find an ironic metaphor in the poetry of Steve McCaffery which was referred to earlier[283]. At the end of the third part of McCaffery's extended work, *Panopticon*, we find a repeated phrase, "and on"[284], which occurs four-hundred-and-forty times. Notwithstanding the fact that the preceding pages are not minimalist, this repetition considered in isolation may be an excellent example of the auto-productive literary object. With each repetition a radical discursive amnesia takes hold. At first, we are aware that the repetition also sets the condition for the subsequent repetitions, but, in reading, as we go *on and on*, so we forget the prescriptions of poetry, we forget the power of the subject, and we become acutely aware of the impossibility of minimum. But our position in the System of the Subject condemns us to an eternal repetition of Being, since we are riveted to existence. And from here, we can only hope to approach minimum, over and over, *on and on*, through the construction of a gap from within, yet, as the limit of discourse, always moving towards the *without*, but never quite setting both feet on this forever-promised soil. Such a literature is minimalist poetry, but it is not poetry. It is the minimalist literary object, but it is neither properly literary, nor is it an object. This is the most and the least we can achieve.

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[283] See pages 26-27.
[284] McCaffery, S. 1994. From 'Panopticon'. In *From the Other side of the Century: A New American Poetry 1960-1990*. Edited by D. Messerli. pp1024-1025.