

PART FOUR

OPAQUE WINDOWS: IN-/CONCLUSION

QUESTIONS

I.

Wandering, and wondering, through conclusions is often a deeply disturbing exercise. The writer may encounter a radical insecurity, and the reader, an amnesia, a progressive forgetting of what has preceded. There is nothing conclusive about a conclusion. If a study reaches a certain point of argumentation, it is sheer folly to suggest that this point should, or even could, be an ending – that from this point it is possible to go no further. We are talking here of discourse, and discourse neither starts nor ends, it takes place. This is the condition of existence, or Being, which has been exposed repeatedly in the present study as subject to the *il y a*, the *there is* which reminds us that there is neither an origin nor an end. In ontological terms, we are, at best, left either with a sublime question, or a question which is prompted by an occasional encounter with the sublime: *is it happening?* – a recall to *now*.

To return to the space of the confessional, I now run the risk of repeating myself one too many times. In other words, I now run the risk of constructing a conclusion, when all that precedes indicates that the condition of being in the atmosphere of the *il y a* prevents precisely this. So, in the spirit of the romantics, I shall at once admit and deny this. I shall admit that I am always already at a loss and abandon the confessional space for a conclusional one (to coin an awkward term, to inaugurate a rather idiosyncratic, paracritical academic space). May I convince you of my sincerity?

¹ Vattimo, G. 1988. 'Nihilism and the Post-modern in Philosophy'. In *The End of Modernity: The Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture*. p104.

II.

Question: What is minimalism?

Answer: Minimalism is a term central in the discourse of impossibility. By discourse of impossibility, I mean nihilism. According to Vattimo the particular project of Nietzschean nihilism inaugurates the postmodern era¹. However, the Nietzschean project proves a problematic proposition, since it advocates the view that nihilism is something to be overcome, drawing it back into constructive discourse and preventing its delivery on the *nothing*, the radical, originary alterity it promises, albeit obliquely.

Heidegger, in turn, recognises and offers substantial critique of Nietzsche's metaphysical nihilism. For him, the term *Dasein*, Being-there, is inextricably caught up in linguistic operation. Thus, he concludes that *Dasein* is always already thrown into *Da, there*, which he identifies as the taking-place of language. In other words, Being is mediated by and through language. As such, nihilism as the undoing of Being, is impossible, since it can only be mediated *as* and *through* language. For Heidegger, coming to terms with or overcoming nihilism is unlikely, if not wholly impossible. He proposes that an overcoming of nihilism would require the invention of an entirely *other* language.

It is in Levinas' idea of the *il y a*, or *there is*, that we encounter a prime ontological term, since it demonstrates that Being is always subject to discourse, reinforcing and expanding on Heidegger's assertions in this regard. For Levinas, Being is marked by a sense of profound terror and horror, for it emerges in the *il y a* as an atmosphere of ambiguity or equivocity in which anything can represent anything else. This possibility of eternal substitution becomes the mark of Being-in-discourse, and dread follows closely, because the *il y a* implies that an escape from Being is nothing more than a linguistic inscription. It follows that there is no way of overcoming Being-in-discourse, which means that we

¹ Vattimo, G. 1988. 'Nihilism and the Post-modern in Philosophy'. In *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture*. p164.

are eternally and interminably riveted to an ontology as mediated by and through language – the condition of contemporary nihilism which is a properly literary category.

The inability to overcome nihilism is demonstrated in the thought of Jacques Derrida, who argues against the presence of an absolute logos, or originary language, which he describes in terms of a necessary impossibility – in other words, that although we cannot reach this original language, we assume its presence in subsequent elaborations of discourse, which means that language (and hence Being) is founded in the profoundest absence and negation, which is simultaneously a necessary assumption of presence. Critchley's argument is particularly relevant in this regard, and has provided a type of conceptual matrix for much of the present study. He argues that because we can say neither *yes* nor *no* to discourse, since we are always already trapped within discourse, coming to terms with the conditions of nihilism really implies a deconstruction, a delineation of the boundaries of Being-in-language *through* language.

To return to the initial question, minimalism, in general aesthetic terms, is a structural attempt within discourse, to achieve precisely this delineation of discourse which Critchley proposes. In turning to Lyotard, we find the sublime question *par excellence*, *is it happening?*, which reintroduces into discourse a radical insecurity and ambiguity which is also implicit in Levinas' *il y a*. What we find in minimalism, is a functional structure within discourse which operates homologically to the theoretical romanticism of the Jena school, as it is reported by Blanchot as well as by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy. The romantic Literary Absolute, as this operation is known, is achieved by structuring discourse by an auto-productive and auto-reflexive radical equivocality, which is to say indeterminacy or ambiguity, or more properly *incompletion*.

Now, minimalism is an approach to minimum. Earlier, it was noted that minimum emerges as the striving for the deconstruction of all discourse from within discourse. This idea of minimalism rests on a distinction established earlier and argued throughout, that the conditions of Being exposed by the *il y a* effectively dissolve the possibility of inertia, of the radical passivity of the sign, in whatever manifestation it appears. From this

perspective, we are constantly returned to discourse, to a position of construction, or a position as subject, while always reaching for the object. And as we perceive, we are also enabled to do so through our association with discourse. In this sense, we are empowered as subjects by discourse, but we also empower discourse as an impossibly complex web of subjects. This is the space I have called the System of the Subject, which can be tentatively conceptualised as the realm of possibility and the incarnation of the mysteriously intangible notion we usually call *reality*.

System of the Subject, language, discourse, literature – these terms operate synonymously, to a large degree. Thus, we find that *minimum* emerges as a radical concept within the System of the Subject of this same system's deconstruction, its active delineation of its own limits. So, in this light, minimalism becomes, broadly speaking, a deconstructive exercise, one which is the attempt at total deconstruction. But, because the very condition exposed by the *il y a* in the nihilistic project reveals that *nothing* is completely unattainable, since it is an inscription of the same discourse it claims to transcend, minimalism is also the search for the impossibility of minimum. In this sense, since *minimum* is the minimum of discourse, it can never be accomplished, because discourse cannot be transcended through any deconstructive decision, as deconstruction is also a discursive act. *Minimum* can only exist as an infinite deferral exercised through an equivocal structure in discourse. In other words, minimalism, as a deconstructive mechanism, presents the conditions of impossibility, emerging, thus, as the eternally lost possibility of the object. And the object is the name used in this discourse for impossibility.

And then... Many would argue, that if we are inescapably situated in the System of the Subject, there is no point to this discursive dream of the object, of alterity, or of minimalism, since it is always fated to failure. And yet this question seems to be one of the most frequently asked ones in the discourse of history. This is, after all, the same question which motivates most religions, besides the complex socio-political issues involved in religious equations. The point of minimalism is not to demonstrate futility – far from it. The point of minimalism is to explore the extremities of Being, the

extremities of human genius and creativity, in a thoroughly self-conscious discourse which ultimately affords a more complete view of the System of the Subject, thereby furnishing Being with a more complete self-apprehension. And, in an odd rhetorical twist, what could be more 'noble' than this?

Question: What is literary minimalism?

Answer: We have already seen that minimalism is the (eternally deferred) approach to minimum. We have also seen that *Dasein* is thrown into language, into *Da*, and Levinas further identifies literature as the privileged place for an encounter with the *il y a*, which is an encounter with both a looming presence and a threatening absence. Literature, in short, is the privileged place of discourse, since it is the record of discourse and hence the record of Being. If literary discourse is the privileged place for Being, it follows that any radical attempts to deconstruct Being (engaging nihilism), would find an equal expression in, and through, literary discourse.

Thus, while we find extremely austere versions of Minimalism within the visual arts and music, these works are seldom truly minimalist. This occurs as a result of the fact that their classification or perception is mediated linguistically. In writing, and particularly in literature, we find the possibility of minimalism, as literary discourse is able to be structured in such a way as to demonstrate, as its work, its unworking. Derived from the distinction between the System of the Subject and the impossibility of the System of the Object, literary minimalism emerges as the unworking of discourse from within the structures of discourse. In this way, literary minimalism, through its appeal to the function of the Minimalist Sublime, is able to avoid the condition of negation encountered in the perception of visual art and music, and emerge as the presentation of the impossibility of *nothing*.

And then... What this means, is that literary minimalism, although it may appear to have little or no aesthetic function to the average consumer, is actually a tremendously

promising project. It is the privileged space for the taking place of a radical deconstruction of the System of the Subject, an oblique embrace of the object through the delineation of the subject. From this position, it is possible to see most clearly just how far our construction in and through discourse, and particularly literary discourse, has taken us in the last millennia. We may also see that there are places we simply cannot go. This means we are exposed to the possibility of constructing, with an increased consciousness, the appropriate and ethical path forward.

Question: What is the minimalist literary object?

Answer: The minimalist literary object is the presentation of that literary product which emerges as our closest possible approximation of the impossible concepts of *object* and *minimum*. As the deconstruction of discourse, the minimalist literary object presents itself in terms of the basic constituent codes of writing, that is, isolated and disjointed phonemes, letters, marks, space. The reason for this presentation is quite simple – it is the process of unworking literature. Consequently, the minimalist literary object is also the deconstruction of the conventional expectations of literature. Literature obliterates realism, for reality, as a transcendental *logos*, proves an impossibility, belonging properly to the System of the Object, and hence is unattainable.

The minimalist literary object is furthermore a super-generic inscription. As we see in the cases of Robbe-Grillet and Beckett, arguably the writers closest to the minimalist aesthetic in their respective genres of prose and drama, it is precisely in their use of conventions pertaining to the *law of genre*, or the principle of order, that their works are held at a distance from the Minimalist Sublime, the minimalist mechanism *par excellence*. Consequently, these two writers are unable to demonstrate minimalism, because they are involved, primarily, in a discussion of minimalist aesthetics, or more properly, nihilistic aesthetics.

However, in poetry we saw that this elusive status of minimalist literary objecthood, is attainable, precisely because the romantic project inaugurates, through poetry, the idea of the absolute genre, which is both the totality of genre and the absence of totality. In other words, poetry, under certain conditions of the sublime operation, can operate as an equivocal literary discourse, as a genre of genres, and at the same time the absence of genre. In this space, we encounter works such as Williams' *like attracts like*, which demonstrates the process of unworking required of the minimalist literary object, and Charles Bernstein's untitled poem which presents the unworked minimalist literary object in its 'full' equivocality. However, these works cannot properly be called poetry in a generic sense, since their very operation is the unworking of the laws of genre, and also the laws of literature – of discourse as a whole.

II. *And then...* It is a conceited, and probably a futile hope, but is it possible to imagine, from this point, the possibility that minimalism, that is, the radical minimalism which I hope this study has opened up, could receive non-pejorative critical and creative attention? At the very least, I would hope that some recognition might be given to those writers working in the field of impossibility that is minimalism, for these are our literary heroes, if ever it were appropriate to have such heroes. For what could be more heroic than engaging nihilistic ontology without the powers of humour, tragedy or horror, which have been the conventional postmodern tools? This is a hope, but I divulge too much of 'myself'.

² Bedson, S. Extract from the *Trilogy*, p178. In Critchley, S. 1997. *They Laugh... When They Drop*. South African Philosophy, Literature, p173.

³ Reichardt, A. 1975. *From Art-as-Art: Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*. *Artforum*, 13, 1975, 144-45.

⁴ Duran, J. (lyrics) & Leigh, M. (music). 'To Dream the Impossible Dream' (from *Man of La Mancha*). D. 1966. *The Man of La Mancha*.

ECHOES

I.

OPAQUE WINDOWS

These creatures have never been, only I and this black void have ever been. And the sounds? No, all is silent. And the lights, on which I had set such store, must they go out too? Yes, out with them, there is no light. No grey either, black is what I should have said. Nothing then but me, of which I know nothing, and this black, of which I know nothing except that it is black and empty. That then is what, since I have to speak, I shall speak of, until I need speak no more².

II.

No realism or existentialism...No impressionism...No expressionism or surrealism...No fauvism, primitivism, or brute art...No constructivism, sculpture, plasticism, or graphic arts. No collage, paste, paper, sand, or string...no 'tromp-l'oeil', interior decoration, or architecture...No texture...No brushwork or calligraphy...No sketching or drawing...no forms...No design...No colours...No light...no space...No time...No size or scale...No movement...No object, no subject, no matter. No symbols, images, or signs. Neither pleasure nor pain. No mindless working or mindless non-working. No chess-playing³

III.

To dream the impossible dream...⁴

² Beckett, S. Extract from the *Trilogy*, p278. In Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p175.

³ Reinhardt, A. 1975. From *Art-as-Art: Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt* (pp205-206). In Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. pp44-45.

⁴ Darion, J. (lyrics) & Leigh, M. (music). 'To Dream the Impossible Dream (The Quest)'. From Wasseman, D. 1966. *The Man of La Mancha*.

As I deconstruct, what I construct. This is the epistemological position of minimalism, elaborated in paradox – the deconstruction of discourse from within discourse.

Do my efforts pay dividends? Do I manage to provide Orpheus with that mirror without transgressing the Law, which is also the line of insurance. What I find, exhausted by the effort, is a window. Indeed, what more promising symbol of access to the outside of world. I am totally ignorant, could I

In-/conclusion:

But, as I approach this window, I cannot see through it. It is completely opaque. I cannot see through it. But of course I cannot see through it, for

Let us return to an original metaphor, the metaphor of the veil. Let us wrap things up, wrap them up once again in this veil of discourse. For is this not ultimately our fate? The operation of discourse, of reality, has constructed before my face a veil so thick and so intricate, that I am mesmerised entirely by its pattern. I am mesmerised to the extent that I call this veil *reality* – I have no other word for it, and it has no other meaning to me. It is the inscription, or more properly, the embroidery of every possibility. It is the same veil I have called the System of the Subject elsewhere.

We weave this veil, I weave this veil out of a compulsion, not out of an original desire. But eventually this compulsion becomes a desire, my only desire: to live, to create, to create 'living'. This veil is the record of the simultaneous presence and absence of the *il y a*. There is nothing beyond the veil, although from time to time I imagine I see a gap, a tear, or some other promise of knowledge of what lies beyond the veil. But as I learn, as I try to gain access to this gap, it turns out to be only an illusion, a particularly cunning embroidery. But I learn, too, that I do not want to be beyond the veil, for I am infatuated with its weave and its embroidery, to the extent that I forget, most often, that it is a veil at all!

But, being human, I remain curious – curious and vigilant – and this is a dangerous combination. So I construct and construct, in the face of impossibility, until I realise that I am equally capable of deconstructing, although the habit of constructing is hard to break.

And so I deconstruct, while I construct. This is the equivocal position of minimalism, saturated in paradox – the deconstruction of discourse from within discourse.

Do my efforts pay dividends? Do I manage to provide Orpheus with that mirror with which he can view Eurydice without transgressing the Law, which is also the *law of literature*. What I find, exhausted by the effort, is a window. Indeed, what more promising symbol of access to the outside, of which I am totally ignorant, could I possibly encounter? But, as I approach this window, I cannot see through it. It is completely opaque. I cannot see through it. But of course I cannot see through it, for beyond, who knows? *Nothing* is a word. I am returned to discourse, I am riveted to Being. But I have followed a fantastic path. And I have looked into that opaque window which is the most I can know of beyond the word *beyond*.

- Aristotle. 1998. *Poetics*. Translated by E. V. Rieu. New York: Theatre Communications Group.
- Baker, K. 1989. *Minimalism: Art of Circumstance*. New York: Abbeville.
- Barnard, P. & Lentricchia, C. 1988. 'Translator's Preface'. In Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J.-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. Translated and introduced by P. Barnard & C. Lentricchia. Albany: State University of New York.
- Barthes, R. 1977. 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives'. In *Image, Music, Text*. Translated by S. Heath. London: Fontana.
- Barthes, R. 1974. *SSZ*. Translated by R. Mallet. New York: Hill & Wang.
- Bauman, Z. 1996. *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Beckett, S. 1990. 'Endgame'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Beckett, S. 1990. 'Footfalls'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Beckett, S. 1990. 'Not I'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber & Faber.