

PART TWO A THEORY OF MINIMALISM

NIHILISM, MINIMUM AND THE SYSTEM OF THE SUBJECT

I.

What is this imprisonment in life I alluded to earlier? It seems an all too obvious paradox, for, having been born, death is the only element of existence I can be sure of. How can I be imprisoned in that which I know (with as much certainty as is it possible to possess) must end? As Giorgio Agamben reports of the tragic knowledge in *Oedipus at Colonus*, “since man is born...the best thing is for him to return as soon as possible whence he came, to ascend beyond his birth through the silent experience of death”¹. If this is the grand realisation of Classical tragedy – a realisation which Critchley might call an active nihilism, one which “risks failing to comprehend the phenomenon of nihilism in its manic desire to overcome it”² – then it would appear that there is more seriousness to this imprisonment than may first seem evident, and certainly something profoundly more problematic than the simplistic exit sought by Oedipus.

The problem, in short, is this: I cannot think, speak, or write³ either my birth or my death, the only two things my being-in-the-world (to borrow from Heidegger), my *Dasein*, makes me sure of. To be sure, I am alive, and so I was born and I must die. Yet these certainties are totally alien to my present condition. As certainties, they are also the infinitely uncertain, the entirely other. And yet I must think, speak, write – I am compelled thus, for I am trapped in the promise of

¹ Agamben, G. 1991. *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*. p90.

² Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p12.

³ Or, for that matter, I cannot visually depict, compose a melody of my birth or death.

language: “to consent to the taking place of language...[is] to consent also to death, to be capable of dying...rather than just deceasing”⁴.

To state the case another way, Being is framed in *and* through language, and yet, according to Heidegger, Being only finds its full expression in death, or “death, as the end of *Dasein*, reveals itself as ‘*Dasein*’s ownmost possibility”⁵. According to this reasoning, which is partly analogous to Hegel’s account of taking–the–*This* (*das Diese nehmen*) – that is, language’s inability to pin down the sense-certainty of utterances such as ‘this piece of paper’ (since the moment of signification is never present in the subsequent linguistic performance) and yet its compulsion to attempt this impossibility⁶ – Being can be understood not only as founded *in* language, but as “the taking place of language, to seize the instance of discourse”⁷. I cannot not communicate, to recall Hanson⁸, and I cannot not seize the instance of discourse, since this is the very negative foundation of Being.

In Heidegger’s ontology, *Dasein* (or Being-there) primarily signifies “Being-the-*Da*”⁹, or Being-the-There, which Agamben identifies as “being at home in one’s own place...through the expression of death...the source from which a radical and threatening negativity emerges...nullify[ing] and introduc[ing] negation into the entity”¹⁰. But what precisely is this *Da*, this word *there*? It is a place, *there*, but before it acquires any possible spatial connotation, it has a linguistic function. *There*, as a pronoun, fits into the category of words which Jakobson refers to as shifters¹¹, which “indicate *that language takes place*. In this way, still prior to the world of meanings, they permit the reference to the very *event of language*”¹². This position prior to meaning, demonstrates the essential negativity on which language is based. The conditions of signification, the “very event of language”, are always shrouded in a thoroughly negative *prior*.

⁴ Agamben, G. 1991. *Death and Language: The Place of Negativity*. p87.

⁵ *Ibid.* p1.

⁶ *Ibid.* pp10-13, 15.

⁷ *Ibid.* p31.

⁸ See page 5.

⁹ Agamben, G. 1991. *Death and Language: The Place of Negativity*. p4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p5.

¹¹ Agamben reports on Jakobson’s argument in Jakobson, R. 1971. ‘Shifters, verbal categories and the Russian verb’. In *Selected Writings*, Volume 2. (Agamben, G. 1991. *Death and Language: The Place of Negativity*. p23).

¹² *Ibid.* p25.

For now, let us say that we are constructed in the essential negativity of discourse. This, I think, is a basic position in much of Derrida's critique in *Of Grammatology*. If we can identify clearly no specific origin or end, no "transcendental signified [which has to be present] for the difference between signifier and signified to be somewhere absolute and irreducible"¹³, then what we are left with/in is discourse, and moreover, according to Derrida, *written* discourse: "what writing itself... betrays is life"¹⁴. It is thus, according to the deconstructive critique of *presence* – and it is important to note a certain echo of the Minimalist artists' call for presence – impossible to posit fixed and irreducible dialectic structures between sign and signified (as was suggested in early structuralism) and hence meaning-perception in general, since there is no foundation on which to base this originarily violent separation.

In a sense, the violence of the original separation, that is, between existence and non-existence, is always already lost and dispersed in the multiplicity of violence which marks discourse. This violence is nothing other than the experience of existence as recorded by and mediated through discourse, the recognition of the essential negativity which is the foundation of discourse and hence means that any presence is always already marked by a violent and radical absence. According to Blanchot, this negativity culminates in the writer (and this could be paralleled in the visual arts and music as well) having *nothing* to say:

...not for lack of means, but because everything he can say is controlled by the nothingness that dread makes appear to him as his own object among the temporary objects that dread gives itself. It is towards nothingness that all literary powers flow back...and this nothingness absorbs them not in an effort to be expressed by them, but rather to consume them with neither aim nor result¹⁵.

This profound dread Blanchot describes is the most cohesive mark of discourse, the mark of a violence that is enacted in the dispersion of the structure of discourse in an irretrievable "*differance*, an economic concept designating the production of differing/deferring"¹⁶, in Derrida's terms. Agamben proceeds:

¹³ Derrida, J. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. p20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p25.

¹⁵ Blanchot, M. 1981. 'From Dread To Language'. In *The Gaze of Orpheus*. Translated by L. Davis. p7.

¹⁶ Derrida, J. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. p23.

Here the problem of the absolute foundation (of ungroundedness) reveals its full weight. The fact that man, the animal possessing language, is, as such, ungrounded...constitutes the basis for the oldest religious practice of humanity: sacrifice...The fact that, in sacrifice as we know it, this action is generally a murder, and the sacrifice is violent, is certainly not casual or insignificant...Violence is not something like an originary biological fact...rather it is the very ungroundedness of human action...that constitutes the violent character...of sacrifice. All human action, inasmuch as it is not naturally grounded but must construct its own foundations, is, according to the sacrificial mythogeme, violent¹⁷.

That our lack of foundation is founded in violence, an originary violence – not so much that it is original, as that it functions as an origin might (at this we can only really conjecture) – is echoed in a recent text by Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, Or The Prosthesis of Origin*:

Since the prior-to-the-first time of pre-originary language does not exist, it must be invented. Injunctions, the summons [mise en demeure] of another writing. But, above all, it must be written within languages...a zone outside the law, the cleaved enclave of a barely audible or legible reference to that entirely other prior-to-the-first language, to that degree zero-minus-one of writing...If for example, I dream of writing an anamnesis of what enabled me to identify myself or say I from the depths of amnesia and aphasia, I know...that I can do it only by opening up an impossible path...inventing a language different enough to disallow its own reappropriation within the norms, the body, and the law of the given language¹⁸.

What Derrida opens up through this argument is precisely the origin of the violence of discourse and the violence which is the origin of discourse. It is in disruption, in the invention of an *other* language that we are able to articulate our existence, and experience this mysterious and ultimately ungraspable Being, which is defined primarily in non-Being, the dread of non-existence. Agamben notes a similar disruption in Heidegger's idea of the *thrownness* of Being, that *Dasein* can never be "the pure event of language...without discovering that it is always already thrown and consigned to discourse. In other words, *Dasein* is located in the place of language without being brought there by its own voice, and language always already anticipates *Dasein*, because it stays without voice in the place of language"¹⁹. What this presentation reveals is precisely the condition of an always already lost originary language which can express pure *Dasein*, and so, it is thrown as a mute participant in discourse, although it is unable to

¹⁷ Agamben, G. 1991. *Death and Language: The Place of Negativity*. p105.

¹⁸ Derrida, J. 1998. *Monolingualism of the Other, Or The Prosthesis of Origin*. pp64-66. In relating Derrida's argument to the thought of Levinas, it appears to be the reappropriation of *the same* which Levinas resists in his ethical proposition regarding the metaphysical question as foundation for ethics: "The possibility of possessing, that is, of suspending the very alterity of what is only at first other, and other relative to me, is the way of the same". (Levinas, E. 1969. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by A. Lingis. p38). What emerges from this relation is the recognition that *possession* is inherently problematic, either of an originary *logos* or of an experience of the Other, since it necessarily involves an ipseistic turn which is always in conflict with the very idea of objectivity.

¹⁹ Agamben, G. 1991. *Death and Language: The Place of Negativity*. p56.

comprehend the taking place of language. This implies that Being, or *Dasein*, is only ever expressed in discourse, and yet is never present to itself in discourse – the violence of its thrownness is similarly its only possible expression, and so this position occupies a role in discourse, ontology and ontological discourse similar to Derrida's dream of the degree zero-minus-one of writing.

The disruption and violence of the negotiation of Being through discourse is noted by Vattimo, who, recalling Heidegger, writes that "we may think of Being only as *gewesen*, only as what is not present (any longer)"²⁰. The violence, then, is the violence of a necessary call to presence which is only ever possible in the profoundest absence. Derrida goes on to write that "there is no meta-language, and that a language shall always be called upon to speak about *the* language – because the latter does not exist"²¹. Since there is no originary language, no knowable origin at all, then what we are left with is a *prosthesis* (and this is the central point of Derrida's argument) – the false limb which is an eternal naïvety, an eternal reminder of the violent separation and irretrievability of pure Being. Language, as such, is the prosthesis for what we have always already lost. And *arché-écriture*²², or originary writing, is the prosthesis for an origin of/original language, which is entirely dreamt up and absent, and yet which we require as the violent establishment of a foundation.

There is a clear connection between Vattimo's description of Being through non-Being, Derrida's notion of prosthesis and Agamben's presentation of Hegel's conception of the Absolute, according to which "the Absolute is not the beginning, what is before time, but only the result that has returned to itself"²³. Now, what Hegel proposes here is the obliteration of the concept of an Absolute origin as a *before*, for he realises all too clearly that this *before* can only ever be spoken in the course of existence, or discourse. As a result, an absolute *before* becomes an empty signifier and a reinforcement of discourse. For Hegel, the only solution lies in an acceptance of the inevitability of such a construction within discourse, and consequently the

²⁰ Vattimo, G. 1988. *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture*. p174.

²¹ Derrida, J. 1998. *Monolingualism of the Other, Or the Prosthesis of Origin*. p69.

²² See West, D. 1996. *An Introduction to Continental Philosophy*. P182.

²³ Agamben, G. 1991. *Death and Language: The Place of Negativity*. p100.

Absolute becomes an original text only inasmuch as it is always a project of return or circularity within discourse.

Again, the notion of imprisonment becomes pivotal. For, if the achievement of the Absolute can be experienced only as a return to the foundations of discourse, but never as a *beyond* discourse, then we truly are always at a loss for words – that is, at a loss for words to express irreducible alterity. The guiding observation returns: my penance is my crime – the binding ignorance of subjectivity. I am, in the best scenario, condemned to return to discourse through the Absolute of discourse. To recall the exhausted veil-metaphor – and it is used precisely because my imprisonment is an action of total exhaustion in a system which is always exhausting its own possibilities – my approach to the veil, in the hopes of catching a glimpse of that which lies behind the veil, is doomed to utter futility. There is no way to even know if there is a *that which lies behind the veil*. And so I name – I give it the name of *nothing* or *impossible*. In naming, we are brought no closer, since *nothing* is as trapped in discourse as it was before I named it. *Nothing* is the prosthesis discourse provides (and which, in a sense, is provided to discourse) to maintain its possibility, a possibility founded in an utter impossibility of objectivity and in an eternal recall and reversion to the subject – these original conditions of nihilism, which are anything but original!

II.

To determine the implications of nihilism in contemporary discourse and aesthetics, which is a professed aim of this study, it becomes vital to first establish precisely what is meant by the term. Gianni Vattimo begins with a caution customary to philosophy: “nihilism is still developing, and it is impossible to draw any definitive conclusions about it”²⁴. Vattimo defines nihilism through the project opened up by the Nietzschean “death of God, or by the ‘devaluation of the highest values’”²⁵ and Heideggerian Being through non-Being mentioned above²⁶. Essentially the proposition amounts to a realisation that the ideals proposed, perhaps even imposed, by the

²⁴ Vattimo, G. 1988. *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture*. p19.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p20.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p19-21. Also see note 15.

Enlightenment cannot hold true and fail to account for the radical alterity of death. Thus, nihilism is opened up as the failure of discourse to account for either origin or end, and nihilism becomes, in this light, the pursuit of the negative foundations of discourse and the impossibility of the foundations of discourse with a consequent exploration of the limits of discourse, since nihilism is *also* only expressible in discourse, in coming to terms with the condition of human finitude.

Following Critchley's excellent discussion, it emerges that "to philosophize in the time of nihilism is to learn how to die *this* death, *my* death, knowing that there is nothing else after this death"²⁷. What nihilism then implies is "not simply...that human beings are mortal, rather that human beings must *become* mortal...the human being is death in the process of becoming"²⁸ (which is Heidegger's assertion). So, if nihilism is such a *becoming of death*, and yet can only exist conceptually within the awkward limits of finitude, Critchley claims²⁹ that nihilism can only fulfill what it claims to – the possibility of impossibility, or the alterity of the becoming of death – as a delineation of the limits of human finitude³⁰.

Critchley identifies two significant precursors in this act of delineation. The first is Adorno, whose philosophy is particularly significant to the current discussion inasmuch as it seeks to exploit the essential dialectics of nihilism. On the one hand, Critchley notes that, for Adorno, "philosophy does not want to give up on the concept of nihilism, because it provides it with a straw man of meaninglessness that can easily be knocked down so that meaning can be restored"³¹. Yet, Adorno maintains that nihilism is opposite to the identification with Nothing³², nihilism as an innately ethical position which finds profound expression in the artistic production and political praxis of discourse. What is at stake in Adorno's brand of nihilism is a radical delineation of the limits of the impossible for the sake of possibility, a restoration of faith in nihilism.

²⁷ Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p25.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p25.

²⁹ And it is a claim that I support wholeheartedly.

³⁰ Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. pp25-26.

³¹ *Ibid.* p20.

³² *Ibid.* p23.

The second is Martin Heidegger, who, we have already seen, emerges as a voice of prime importance in the understanding of the essentially negative character of *Dasein* as established through the place of negativity characteristic of language as a whole. Critchley claims that “for Heidegger...the essence of nihilism lies in history, in the manner in which Being has fallen into nothing”³³. Heidegger’s essential objection to what the Nietzschean project opens up is not its conclusions concerning the human condition, as much as that the idealistic approach to nihilism as an *overcoming* is inevitably a restoration of metaphysics, which means that nothing has, or can be accomplished³⁴. Heidegger’s essential proposition, then, is that nihilism, since it is approached only in discourse and it approaches only through discourse, consists of a redefinition of the language of discourse. In Critchley’s summation:

*How can nihilism be overcome if our language...remains the same metaphysical language of nihilism? Might not the very language of metaphysics be the barrier to any crossing of the line and hence the obstacle to any overcoming of nihilism? For Heidegger, a thinking of the essence of nihilism in non-metaphysical terms demands a transformation of language...a thoughtful forward glance into the realm of Being can only be written in the following way: *Being*. What this crossing out suggests is that...the line separating nihilism from its overcoming is not something to be crossed, but rather that the line should be meditated in this crossing out, an attempt to render Being invisible that simply makes it more visible³⁵.*

What we have then, in the “meditated...crossing” is not only the echo of the delineation Critchley considers imperative, but a clear emphasis on the foundation of Being in the negative place of language. Nihilism, in this light, is the search, within discourse, for the limits of discourse. As Derrida notes: “it is thus that, after evoking the ‘voice [as the always already thrown/displaced source] of being’, Heidegger recalls that it is silent, mute, insonorous, wordless, originarily *a-phonetic*. The voice of the source is not heard...It [the source of Being] is at once contained within it and transgresses it”³⁶ – to recall the earlier argument, the mute Voice of Being is always already thrown in language.

³³ *Ibid.* p14-15.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p13.

³⁵ *Ibid.* pp16-17. While Heidegger asserts the need for finding a new language for expressing Being, Levinas’ ethical proposition, which he develops in his later work, emerges as pre-linguistic, in the sense that it can never be reduced to a discourse and precedes as a metaphysical question. According to Derrida’s discussion of Levinas, “this solitude of the ‘existent’ [human being] in its ‘existence’ would be primordial and could not be conceived on the basis of the neutral unity of *existence* which Levinas often and profoundly describes under the heading of the [*il y a*]”. (Derrida, J. 1978. ‘Violence and Metaphysics’. In *Writing and Difference*. Translated by A. Bass. p111).

³⁶ Derrida, J. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. p22.

To reiterate and expand: nihilism is the search for the discourse of the limit of discourse (perhaps the *end* of discourse) within discourse – the possibility of the limit of possibility (or perhaps impossibility) within the negative foundations of possibility, since possibility must always end in the inevitable impossibility of oblivion or annihilation, which cannot be thought, spoken or written. As Critchley asks: “Can I say ‘I can’ to death? Can I?...‘I cannot’...Death is not the object or meaningful fulfillment of an intentional act”³⁷. The response which nihilism calls us to, therefore, is “*meaningless as an achievement*”³⁸. Blanchot proposes the following:

*Until now we thought nihilism was tied to nothingness. How ill-considered this was: nihilism is tied to being. Nihilism is the impossibility of being done with it and of finding a way out even in that end that is nothingness. It says the impotence of nothingness, the false brilliance of its victories; it tells us that when we think nothingness we are still thinking being*³⁹.

Essentially what Blanchot proposes is that nihilism, as thought through Being (for it can only be thought through Being) – and remembering that Being is thought through discourse, whether it is the thrownness of *Dasein* into language, or Derrida’s dream of a language *prior-to-the-first* language – is only ever a re-expression of Being in discourse. This position may be interestingly juxtaposed with Emmanuel Levinas’ recognition of the *il y a* (there is), the “impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable ‘consummation’ of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself”⁴⁰, and yet we are always left with “the atmosphere”⁴¹ of presence, which can, to be sure, appear later as a content”⁴².

³⁷ Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. pp25-26.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p27.

³⁹ Blanchot, M. 1993. ‘Reflections on Nihilism’. In *The Infinite Conversation*. p149.

⁴⁰ Levinas, E. 1989. ‘There is: Existence without Existents’. In *The Levinas Reader*. Edited by S. Hand. p30. It is important to note that Levinas, in his later thought, does not think of the *il y a* as the prime term in philosophical discourse. In *Totality and Infinity*, for example, such emphasis falls on the ethical domain. In this work, the metaphysical (ethical) is employed as a term which precedes ontology: “If ontology – the comprehension, the embracing of Being – is impossible...it is because the comprehension of Being in general cannot *dominate* the relationship with the Other. The latter relationship commands the first”. (Levinas, E. 1969. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by A. Lingis. p47). Levinas thereby asserts the ability to identify with the absolutely Other without possession or domination as a founding supposition of ontology. The ethical relation is presented in the following terms: “A calling into question of the same – which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same – is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics. Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the other by the same, of the Other by me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the same by the other, that is, as ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge. And as critique precedes dogmatism, metaphysics precedes ontology” (*Ibid.* p43). Derrida describes this point as follows:

According to Levinas' argumentation, the *il y a* leads us to a profound and debilitating horror, which is not the dread or horror Heidegger associates with the confrontation with death (Being-towards-death), but, as Critchley notes, "that dread is had in the face of existence itself, of being riveted to existence, *the impossibility of death*"⁴³. Levinas describes the *il y a* in the following terms:

Negation does not end up with being as a structure and organization of objects; that which affirms and imposes itself in the extreme situation...and which we approach in the night and the tragic, is being as an impersonal field, a field without proprietor or master, where negation, annihilation and nothingness are events like affirmation, creation and subsistence, but impersonal events. A presence of an absence, the [il y a]⁴⁴ is beyond contradiction; it embraces and dominates its contradictory. In this sense being has no outlets⁴⁵.

Here, we have a place which is always a non-place, the possibility of impossibility which attempts not to transcend Being, but to totally consume it in the impossibility of its beyond, where "there is no determined being, anything can count for anything else. In this ambiguity the menace of pure and simple presence of the *il y a*, takes form"⁴⁶. According to Critchley, Levinas regards the *il y a* as the "moment of literature"⁴⁷. This position finds an echo in Blanchot's writing as well, in the dread "of having nothing to write, of having no means of writing it, and of being forced by an extreme necessity to keep writing it"⁴⁸. This *nothing* which is the place of

"This thought calls upon the ethical relationship to the infinite as infinitely other, to the Other – as the only one capable of opening the space of transcendence and of liberating metaphysics". (Derrida, J. 1978. 'Violence and Metaphysics'. In *Writing and Difference*. Translated by A. Bass. p102). However, the *il y a*, in many regards, acts as a pre-ontological term, and should not be simply dismissed in light of the statements above. Indeed, the *il y a* looms as a neutral presence before the linguistic taking-place of either affirmation or negation. Nonetheless, the ethical or metaphysical question is given precedence in Levinas' later work. For the purposes of the present study, I have not dealt with the vast ethical implications of both minimalist literature and Levinas' ethics. Instead, the discussion focuses on the relationship between literature and ontology with a particular emphasis on the construction of Being through and in literary discourse; the *reality-effect* of minimalist literature, if you will.

⁴¹ It is interesting to note a certain correlation of terminology between Levinas' use of *atmosphere* and Heidegger's idea of *Stimmung* "which...translate[s] as 'mood'". (Agamben, G. 1991. *Death and Language: The Place of Negativity*. p55). According to Agamben, "*Stimmung* conveys Dasein before the disclosure of its *Da*" (*Ibid* p56), in other words *Stimmung* operates as a primary mood of negativity before the taking place in language, which is simultaneously irretrievable, since Dasein is always already thrown in language, in *Da*, the event of language.

⁴² *Ibid*. p35.

⁴³ Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p55.

⁴⁴ The original French term *il y a* has been preferred to the translation as *there is*.

⁴⁵ Levinas, E. 1989. 'There is: Existence without Existents'. In *The Levinas Reader*. Edited by S. Hand. p35.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*. p31.

⁴⁷ Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p58.

⁴⁸ Blanchot, M. 1981. 'From Dread To Language'. In *The Gaze of Orpheus*. Translated by L. Davis. p5.

language, is both *nothing* which needs to appear in discourse, and yet, *no thing* which can be put into discourse. Blanchot continues: “[The writer] seeks it in the no that is not the no to this, to that, to everything, but the pure and simple no”⁴⁹ – the *il y a* – the complete negation of the completely other night, the dreadful promise of what lies behind the veil, but through language and discourse is always already before the veil, the terrifying embroidery of the veil.

Blanchot’s position in *The Gaze of Orpheus* is similar: “Orpheus [the writer] forgets the work he has to accomplish, and he has to forget it, because the ultimate requirement of his impulse is not that there should be a work, but that someone should stand and face this ‘point’ and grasp its essence...in the heart of the night”⁵⁰. It is this impulse of the writer, which is also the impulse of literature and of discourse (if discourse may be considered primarily linguistic, which I believe it can). The impulse is the horror, the dread, the eternally recurring mystery of the *il y a*, the atmosphere, obscurity and ambiguity before Being, but also always tied into the experience of Being. Levinas phrases a prime ontological problem – which is the first place of all discourse and the first place of literature which ensures literature a first place, so to speak, – as follows:

*To be conscious is to be torn away from the il y a , since the existence of a consciousness constitutes a subjectivity, a subject of existence, that is, to night. Horror is somehow a movement which will strip consciousness of its very ‘subjectivity’. Not in lulling it into unconsciousness, but in throwing it into an impersonal vigilance, a participation*⁵¹.

It is here, in the heart of the *il y a*, that we are unexpectedly transported to discourse, and to a model of discourse which explains why discourse, language and literature are always already a System of the Subject. How, then, do we approach *minimum*, or re-approach the *il y a*, in a way which does not doom us to the fate of Orpheus, that is, always confronting the essential night in the exposition of the work, but always losing that essence in the same work?

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p5.

⁵⁰ Blanchot, M. 1981. ‘The Gaze of Orpheus’. In *The Gaze of Orpheus*. Translated by L. Davis. p99.

⁵¹ Levinas, E. 1989. ‘There is: Existence without Existents’. In *The Levinas Reader*. Edited by S. Hand. p32.

III. is why discourse invariably returns to the impossibility of saying/demonstrating nothing. This inability to say nothing, except as a word, the essence of signifiers (and yet, through the

As demonstrated above, the questions of discourse, writing, literature, nihilism and being intertwine, overlap and intersect continuously. It is not possible to isolate the one completely without a false exclusion of the others. One might say that they are violently imbricated, in the sense of violence referred to above.

In the positioning of Minimalism within this discourse, there seems to be a certain *double negative* at play. If, as posited earlier, Minimalism attempts to approach *minimum* through the calculated construction of objecthood, which is as much a conceptual consideration as it is a reflection of the object itself, then it does so within the expanding structures of discourse. What Minimalism attempts then, is the negation of the subject (by attempting to achieve objecthood) in the negating power of discourse. From the position reached now, it is at least clear that Minimalism, that is, the historical movement, is never accomplished. Like all other aspects emerging from this delicately negotiated negation between language and Being, the aesthetic movement is never entirely freed from the negation of itself within the discourse it constructs to define itself. In other words, the power of the negative in discourse is always prior to any differentiation between subject and object (constructed from within discourse) and, consequently, the art-object proves to be always already negated in the process of subjectification. If this is the case with all movements, the problem is heightened in the case of Minimalism, since its professed programme is precisely the impossibility presented above, the overthrowing of the traditional aspects of art (as a whole) and the substitution of an object-oriented discourse for the previously dominant subject-orientation of aesthetic history.

These considerations find expression in Levinas' theory of the *il y a*: the inexorable terror of the object is always already lost through consciousness, and, since discourse and language are the *preeminent* vehicles for consciousness (that is, consciousness as Being), the object is automatically transformed into the subject. If the ultimate question of nothingness serves as the origin of discourse, it is already preempted by the *il y a*, which, although eternally removed, is still eternally present as the dread and horror of existence.

This is why discourse invariably returns to the impossibility of saying/demonstrating *nothing*. This inability to say *nothing*, except as a word, the emptiest of signifiers (and yet, through the mystery of the *il y a*, also the fullest), serves as a type of master-discourse for discourse, of the broad kind alluded to in Derrida's dream of the prior-to-the-first language, the so-called discourse of discourses. Now, Minimalism tries to present *nothing but itself*, itself as pure object, and yet, we must question this attempt from the outset. Beyond the physical and procedural efforts of internal⁵² and external⁵³ nonrelational parts, beyond the calls for holism⁵⁴, unity and nonreferentiality⁵⁵, and beyond the *presence*⁵⁶ by which Minimalists were so consumed, we find that presence is always marked by the profoundest absence. The objecthood of the Minimalists is always trapped in subjecthood. Why? Because there simply *is no knowable outside* of discourse, except the outside which is constructed within and through discourse, which is then not outside at all⁵⁷.

At this point, the idea of the System of the Subject requires some definition. To recall Critchley's summary of the Hegelian definition of the subject cited earlier: "the subject, for Hegel, is the power of the negative...which is able to dissolve that which stands over against it as an object in-itself and translate it into something for-itself"⁵⁸. From the preceding discussion, it becomes apparent that the "power of the negative" is nothing other than the power of language, or the power of discourse. Agamben states, in quite explicit terms, that "that which is always already indicated in speech without being named, is, for philosophy, being"⁵⁹. What may be extracted from Hegel's concept is the idea of translation, the activation of transformation in and through language and discourse, and from Agamben's argument, the importance of the apparently linguistic unit of the *shifter*. If we juxtapose these two, we come, again, to the *il y a* – *there is* – which is nothing other than the shifter in an already perpetual action.

⁵² See pp18-20.

⁵³ See pp20-22.

⁵⁴ See pp25-27.

⁵⁵ See pp24-25.

⁵⁶ See pp22-24.

⁵⁷ It is important to note that in Levinas' later philosophy the question of an *outside* finds expression in the metaphysical question, which, because it involves the ethical action of reaching towards the absolutely Other, involves a leaving of the ego, or an exterior to the *I*. (Levinas, E. 1969. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by A. Lingis. pp35-40).

⁵⁸ Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p53.

⁵⁹ Agamben, G. 1991. *Death and Language: The Place of Negativity*. p25.

states that "while certain Minimal artists denied an interest in making either painting or sculpture To recall Levinas, the consciousness which is discourse and language results in a radical absence of the *il y a*, constituting the subject. But the horror which always invades, always recalling the *il y a*, simultaneously breaks down the subject. What we find, then, in the juxtaposition of the action and the shifter, is the constitution of the conditions for the ascent of the subject which carry simultaneously the dread and threat of its destruction. In short, the subject is constituted in and through language as that Being which can act or transform, but in this very action also summons a profound dread, which, according to Levinas, lies precisely in this imperative to act, the inability to stop acting – being riveted to discourse.

The System of the Subject may, in these terms, be described as the active Being in discourse, the construction of Being in discourse, with the near infinite possibilities of action this implies (epistemologically, aesthetically or ethically). As mentioned earlier⁶⁰, there is no such thing as a passive sign. Even *nothing* acts. The signifier is empowered with the ability to transform, to signify, and, as Derrida demonstrates, the signified is also always a signifier⁶¹. The semiotic process is also, thus, the active establishment, reestablishment and reinforcement of the System of the Subject. The dream of *the nothing* which precedes everything is lost in the dynamism of the System of the Subject. Discourse, as the System of the Subject, is the veil which conceals our inability to think beyond the Subject – the disguise which attempts to both recollect, and in failing to do so, to provide substitutes for our radical amnesia.

IV.

As soon as I am able to inscribe Minimalism as an *aesthetic movement*, this inscription empowers it as a subject within the System of the Subject. The idea of the Movement, precisely because it is somewhat paradoxical in the sense that it imposes a certain stasis on the dynamism of discourse, is homologous to the Hegelian view of the subject expressed above. It is able, in this way, to transform otherwise arbitrary signs in discourse into signifiers-for-itself. Colpitt

⁶⁰ See page 2.

⁶¹ See, for example, West, D. 1996. *An Introduction to Continental Philosophy*. p180.

states that “while certain Minimal artists denied an interest in making either painting or sculpture – and claimed to be making *objects* – they were all convinced that these objects were *art objects*”⁶². Key in this statement are the terms “making” and “*art objects*”.

If Minimalists insist on *making* works of art, musical compositions and literature, then it is clear that their efforts at erasing evidence of facture, of internal and external relations, are always already redundant. Furthermore, the implicit elevation of the work into aesthetic discourse which is involved in this process of *making* is nothing other than the relation of Being to the work in question, and of the work in question to Being. Now, since Being is always already thrown into discourse, subject to the horror of the *il y a*, it follows that the expressions of Being in the empowerment or the subjectification of the object is likewise always already imprisoned by the ignorance of the veil, that is, the binding ignorance of the discourse which empowers its apparent existence. Again, the object is only an object inasmuch as it is also a subject; or, the object is constructed within and *acts* as discourse – the System of the Subject.

The central proposition, then, is that the Minimalist dream of objecthood relies on certain assumptions regarding the independence of objects which no longer hold true under the conditions inaugurated by the *il y a*. In several respects, the Minimalist appeal seems to coincide with Merleau-Ponty’s assertions regarding language. In Kearney’s summation, Merleau-Ponty suggests that “the artistic forms such as painting, music, poetry provide a privileged access to the hidden workings of language. Behind the transparency of secondary expression, art reveals the *indirect* voices of primary expression”⁶³. In Merleau-Ponty’s own words, “no language ever wholly frees itself from the precariousness of mute forms of expression”⁶⁴. Although, on the surface, Merleau-Ponty seems to establish a relationship to Heidegger’s assertion that the Voice is ultimately mute, when we examine this assertion more closely, it appears, rather, that Merleau-Ponty proposes language as secondary to primary perception:

As our body guides us among things only on condition that we stop analyzing it and make use of it, language is literary (that is, productive) only on condition that we stop asking justifications of it at each

⁶² Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p126.

⁶³ Kearney, R. 1994. *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*. p80.

⁶⁴ Merleau-Ponty, M. 1974. ‘Indirect Language and the Voice of Silence’. In *Phenomenology, Language and Sociology: Selected Essays of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*. Edited by J. O’Neill. p75.

*instant and follow it where it goes, letting the words and all the means of expression of the book be enveloped by that halo of signification that they owe to their singular arrangement, and the whole writing veer toward a second-order value where it almost rejoins the mute radiance of painting*⁶⁵.

From Merleau-Ponty's statement, the ideal experience of literature would lead us *back* to the mute primacy which informs painting and music, for example. What this effectively suggests is a pure sensation of Being which precedes its expression in discourse or its semiotic confusion in language, or the System of the Subject. As Kearney deduces from Merleau-Ponty, "by providing us with a formal presentation of our pre-objective modes of experience, art opens up a 'universal' realm of primary expression. This universal realm is what Merleau-Ponty calls the 'aesthetic logos of the life-world'"⁶⁶.

It is likely that the Minimalist appeal to objecthood as something pure and original appeals to a phenomenology of this order. It is only in this light that statements such as Stella's quoted earlier, "that only what can be seen there *is* there... What you see is what you see"⁶⁷, appear to be validated. In other words, in and through Minimalist art, Stella seeks to invoke the primacy of primary expression. But what versions of phenomenology such as Merleau-Ponty's fail to apprehend (although I have admittedly oversimplified his position quite considerably), is that the very insight required to reach these apparent epiphanies regarding perception are mediated through language and discourse in the first place.

The Minimalist assumption that there is something inherently present which is waiting to explode in the production of artistic objects, proves to be a naïve presupposition which cannot possibly hold *true* in the rigorous negativity of language and Being explored above. It is precisely this issue which Colpitt's assessment fails to come to grips with. She claims that, for the Minimalists, "this was not a philosophical argument: what is 'real' is what has material existence and does not pretend to be other than what it is"⁶⁸. And this is precisely the problem – ontology has demonstrated to us that there is no outside, as such. It is a naïve and yet extremely arrogant dream to simply disregard the philosophy of reality and, in the same move, lay claim to

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p75.

⁶⁶ Kearney, R. 1994. *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*. pp80-81.

⁶⁷ Frank Stella. In Glaser, B. 1966. 'Questions to Stella and Judd'. In *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. 1968. Edited by G. Battcock. p158.

⁶⁸ Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p106.

such *reality* in the art-object. Reality is *always* constructed, and it can only be constructed through discourse. In many respects, discourse is nothing other than the construction of ‘reality’.

In this light, for the Minimalist artist to lay claim to objecthood as if it were some ready-made trophy which has just been discovered, is an impossibility. Consider a hypothetical minimalist object, a square, black, monochromatic canvas. Can we truly say that it is an object, that it conveys nothing but itself, without already having some linguistically determined notion of what constitutes *nothing* and how this is to be communicated in art. I would suggest that we cannot. In this sense, the critical determination of objecthood, which, as has been demonstrated, is above all else the principal concern of Minimalism, is always constructed in discourse *prior* to its supposed invention in art, which is, of course, not really its invention at all. If minimalism⁶⁹ is possible – if it is possible to attempt access to the beyond which is always presented in discourse only, to *minimum*, that last structure in discourse which defeats itself – then it is certainly not to be found in an appeal to a prior reality to establish the impossible condition of objecthood.

Yet, upon a cursory observation, it appears that this logocentric view still dominates current western discourse. It is precisely the impossibility of this *logos* which we have seen informs Minimalism, and the assumption of its general dominance would explain the apologetic approach to literary Minimalism favoured by Hallett. In recalling her description of literary Minimalism as “a...universe in which ‘real’ communication is impossible...a recognition that words are useless, for most things are unsayable”⁷⁰, we may remark on a connection with the negative foundations of language. But is this not the case with all literature – and if a writer demonstrates a consciousness of this connection, surely it does not imply an inherent connection to the idea of minimum? On closer consideration, it becomes apparent that the impotence of language Hallett identifies in literary Minimalism may, as easily, result from an assumption that literature appeals to some prior order of things which is superior to it, associating it with Merleau-Ponty’s view. If this is indeed the case, then, according to Hallett’s assessment, literary Minimalism is condemned to a profound dissatisfaction with itself, a colossal inferiority complex which

⁶⁹ I use the lower-case *m* here to signify a shift from the artistic movement, to a more dynamic movement, in the search for objecthood.

⁷⁰ Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. p25.

emerges from the failure to recognise that discourse constructs reality, and that the place of the *il y a* is literature. If anything, surely this would place literature in a position of extreme advantage?

V. course. However, I believe what one might term a *directional error* of the type identified by Merleau-Ponty's view of language is at work in this reasoning, when considered in a fully

While it is possible to identify a definite effort towards objecthood in Minimalist art and music, the canonised movement of Minimalist literature fails in this regard. To return to Raymond Carver briefly, it is apparent that his stories are, without exception, referential, even if not representational in every sense of the word – it may be argued, for example, that literature creates its own reality, in which case it is possible to view the contents of this reality as nonrepresentational. Even if this argument is employed to defend Minimalist literature, it should be noted that referentiality is unavoidable.

In fact, much recent critical effort has been devoted to revising Carver's association with Minimalism. Apart from Verhoeven's study mentioned earlier, Tony Hilfer notes that the principal drive behind Carver's fiction is identifiable as "a reflex to lower-class exigency"⁷¹ and is not only an aesthetic concern. Beyond his inappropriate classification as a Minimalist, Carver is most often identified as a realist. Shechner notes that "it is generally conceded that the catalyst for the realist revival of the 1980s was Raymond Carver, whose short stories...renewed confidence...that the homely form of the traditional story and...plain speech...still had their place in American writing"⁷². Shechner considers Carver's association with realism in the following terms:

*Carver's great resource was a simple evocative Anglo-Saxon English...a capacity for seeing clearly and the power to create, in prose, the illusion of a sharply visualised world. This is the work of a writer who cared about language because language was the thread that connected him most directly to life, which is why he strikes us as such a responsible mediator between his world and our own*⁷³.

⁷¹ Hilfer, T. 1992. *American Fiction Since 1940*. p182.

⁷² Shechner, M. 1992. 'American Realisms, American Realities'. In *Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction*. Edited by K. Versluys. p40.

⁷³ *Ibid.* p43.

Language is not only *a* thread that connected Raymond Carver to life, but, as we have seen, the *only* thread, and then not only in the case of Carver, but as a condition for all human *beings*. It is quite possible to agree with Shechner's association of Carver's writing with the illusion of a sharply visualised world, that is also an affirmation of the reality-constructive function of discourse. However, I believe what one might term a *directional error* of the type identified in Merleau-Ponty's view of language is at work in this reasoning, when considered in a fuller context. The primary source of this constructed illusion is identified in Carver's "capacity for seeing clearly". What is seeing clearly? Is seeing clearly misidentifying some stitch in the (ever-recurring) metaphorical veil? We only ever see clearly what we construct as clear, and so the realist claim to have gained access to a *prior* reality proves farcical.

From Shechner's analysis, it would appear that Carver's writing exists in a very traditional narrative space. Carver is, in this light, the mediator of worlds – a constructor of truths, if you like – which is far from the dread Blanchot so convincingly evokes as characteristic of the act of writing. If, as Fluck suggests, "realism [can] be considered as a literature intent on arresting semantic play by insisting on the need of life-likeness and verisimilitude in representation"⁷⁴, then the neo-realist literary project dooms itself on account of its intense naïvety in assuming that there is an absolute life which can be imitated, and in failing to come to terms with the fact that *life* (whatever value this term may hold) is always a construction of discourse in the (proverbial) first place. If Carver's fictions "result in an effective illusion of reality"⁷⁵, it is only because reality is always already an effective illusion, a veil made up of infinite linguistic threads, to recall and transform Shechner's quotation above.

In Carver's short story *The bath*, for example, the reader is presented with a dispassionate account of an accident in which a boy is run down by a car (on the eve of his eighteenth birthday) and his parents' vigil at his hospital bed. The horror of the incident is amplified by the conscious neutrality of Carver's narrative. The dialogue between the parents is fragmentary and fractured:

⁷⁴ Fluck, W. 1992. 'Surface and Depth: Postmodernism and Neo-Realist Fiction'. In *Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction*. Edited by K. Versluys. p69.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p69.

'I suppose one of us should go home and check on things,' the man said. 'The dog needs to be fed'
 'Call the neighbors,' the wife said...
 'Maybe I'll do it. Maybe if I'm not here watching, he'll wake up...'
 'That could be it,' the husband said.
 'I'll go home and take a bath and put on something clean,' the woman said.
 'I think you should do that,' the man said⁷⁶.

What we see here, however, is the writer's insistence that the fractured lives are the origin of fractured discourse. It is impossible to approach objecthood from this perspective, since discourse is, in this view, always held as secondary, apart from experience. So it seems that Carver's writing cannot be regarded as Minimalist since it is activated continuously as a referential subject. In the failure to recognise that fissure, fracture and fragmentation are always already present in writing, and that discourse posits the conditions for Being noted through discourse, it is likewise incapable of approaching minimum, and certainly cannot be defined as minimalist (the lower-case *m* signifying this attempted approach towards minimum).

Nothing

VI.

A literature which places itself so clearly in the tradition of narrative, even if this placement is often a counter-placement, an identification in opposition to conventional narrative (and hence the frequent identification of Minimalist literature as avant-garde), appeals to an *outside* in a position of great privilege in relation to itself. In other words, narrative is generally structured so as to appear as part of a greater reality – a reality of actions, characters and events which have their prototypes *somewhere else*. In this way, narrative attempts to conceal the fact that it, like everything else, is always part of the inter-subjectivity of the System of the Subject; that, in attempting to draw itself from that which is outside of it, it can only draw on itself as discourse, which is only a difference in degree and not kind of all the structures of this so-called 'reality' of discourse.

To restate the position of literature otherwise, a literature which professes to be a condensed object always speaks to us as a subject, in the System of the Subject. And if we are tempted to

⁷⁶ Carver, R. 1985. 'The bath' from *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. In *The Stories of Raymond Carver*. p214.

say “this is true objecthood”, it is only because these self-constituting subjects convince us of their objecthood, which is, in fact, objecthood only when we refuse to engage them as fellow-subjects. But in literature the position is more complex. Writing or literature is not only discourse through and through, but also the history of discourse. It is the historical mode in western culture of discourse, in fact, the very history of Being in general. Stated simplistically, discourse functions to present and construct a presentation of ‘the world’, the ‘everything’ we construct into units and call reality in the absence of an ability to recognise anything *other* than this – the atmosphere of the *il y a* which always rivets us to existence. And precisely because discourse is the most primordial thing we can know, since it is that which we construct in a naïve attempt to mime those things which, upon reflection, we have always already lost (if they were ever there?), discourse is always inextricably knotted in meaning, in Subjecthood. The historical mode of our evolving subjecthood seems, in this light, somewhat absurd as an *object* of study.

Nothing.

All we have or have ever had, and yet that which we have never had, never have and will never have, is discourse. There is *no* beyond, because this beyond is discovered only in and as discourse. This leads to objecthood in literature as a profoundly optimistic Utopianism. In reaching for the objecthood of literature within its discourse, we reach for the deconstruction of *all* discourse: and *this is minimum*. But there is no beyond, so we cannot mediate one discourse’s destruction through another’s affirmation. What happens, despite anybody’s best intentions, is the affirmation of the System of the Subject, since how else could the object be, except in the language of the subject: and this is the *impossibility of minimum*.

Nothing

It is precisely this impossibility which reinvigorates the dream of literary objecthood. And it is horror and dread to which, of all things, minimum is closest, that reinvigorate discourse. As I shall attempt to demonstrate, by knowing and structuring itself according to this reinvigorating impossibility, the textual object is able to theorise itself as object, even though it simultaneously knows itself as subject, as presentation within discourse. It knows itself as a radical fracturing of

discourse. It forces a jogging-of-this-discursive-memory, and, in doing this, reminds us at once of both the impossibility of nihilism and the impossibility of absolutism. And this impossibility signals also the impossibility of minimum, moving beyond Minimalism and heralding, if in a necessarily paradoxical fashion, the possibility of minimalism.

THE MINIMALIST SUBLIME

I.

From the arguments above it would appear that the idea of *minimum* emerges in discourse as a mechanism to defeat discourse. In this light, the movement towards minimum, which is a reactivation of the term *minimalism*, is a potent mechanism in the delineation of the nihilism⁷⁷ Critchley proposes and identifies through the ontological implications in the writing of Heidegger, Blanchot and Levinas. It is clear, however, from this same writing that reaching minimum is also an impossibility, since there is no outside informing discourse. What then, is the possible case for minimalism, when the conditions which prevent the achievement of minimum prove to present an *a priori* defeat?

We have seen that the *il y a* calls us back to Being and speaks to us of the impossibility of achieving our own death. This is the same impossibility of accomplishing minimum-as-an-achievement. It is possible in this light to compare minimum to the dying moment, the moment of death, which is entirely unutterable. In this moment, ontology teaches us that we are simultaneously closest to both life and death. This is the moment of utter impossibility, the impossibility of going on (living) and yet equally the impossibility of letting go (dying). The

⁷⁷ Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy and Literature*. p12.

moment of death is the position of least difference between life and death, one might say. It is the boundary or the limit of Being in discourse, of *Dasein*, of the *Da*. It is the moment when Being becomes Sublimity – literally *under* the limit. At this promised moment, Being is kept under the limit of Being, and human finitude finds its expression in the impossible. This is why dying is impossible, and only deceasing occurs. For should the moment of dying pass, discourse is lost and so is Being, and yet, at that moment a distance remains between the experience of Being and the limit of Being. This, again recalls the *il y a*, which is the reminder that we are always already tied to Being inasmuch as we are anything.

This space or distance is also the minimum: the least possible and yet, paradoxically, the most possible. It is the least possible involvement in discourse, but is also the most clear expression of discourse, of Being. It promises to be the conceptual portal to nothingness, to *no discourse*, but always brings us back to discourse. Minimum, to return to the metaphor of the veil, is that moment which promises to reveal the veil as a veil, as a construction of discourse, as a finely embroidered cloth and nothing more. It promises to reveal a clear sensation of that which lies beyond the veil, because knowing the veil as a veil, reason dictates that I would be able to feel the faint breeze from behind it which promises this knowledge. But instead, I am doomed to disappointment, because this space cannot be reached, so all there is or can be, is the veil. There can be no knowledge of *nothing*, except as a word.

But it is the impossibility of achieving minimum which is also, paradoxically, the possibility for the movement towards minimum, the movement of minimalism. How is this movement inscribed within discourse as a deconstruction of discourse? It is in the ideas of the Sublime, as it has developed in recent western philosophy, and the Literary Absolute, as formulated by the Jena romantics, that it is possible to identify a mechanism for this inscription.

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 'trompe-l'oeil', interior decoration, or architecture...No texture...No brushwork or calligraphy...No sketching or drawing...No forms...No design...No colors...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-playing*⁷⁸.

When Ad Reinhardt wrote this passage, he was not suggesting that this state could be achieved, or that it was imminent, the next logical step in a giant puzzle of aesthetic development. He was expressing frustration at what he perceived as the fraudulent aspirations of Abstract Expressionism⁷⁹. Many critics might argue that an essentially negative proposition such as Reinhardt's is doomed, since it proposes no alternative, or, more accurately, leaves nothing from which art may be constructed. According to this critical model, Reinhardt must be taken to task for advocating what is essentially an impossibility. Yet it is precisely in this nihilistic proposition – the proverbial answer in a resounding *no* – that Reinhardt finds the least expected and, paradoxically, a positive or productive solution.

Essentially what Reinhardt proposes is a reactivation of the notion of the Sublime in the place of a profoundly encompassing negativity, a place which Lyotard associates with the frequently overlooked aspect of temporality, the *now*, which “dismantles consciousness”⁸⁰. Lyotard proposes the following:

*Now...is what consciousness cannot formulate, and even what consciousness forgets in order to constitute itself. What we do not manage to formulate is that something happens...Or rather, and more simply, that it happens...Not a major event in the media sense, not even a small event. Just an occurrence...The event happens as a question mark 'before' happening as a question. It happens is rather 'in the first place' is it happening, is this it, is it possible?*⁸¹.

What emerges from Lyotard's proposition is a specific investment of the *il y a* in discourse, that the presence of the *il y a* as the infinitely ambiguous *now* exists somehow differently from the overwhelming dread and terror which characterises discourse at all times. Lyotard suggests that there is a certain operation that allows us access to the *il y a*, the question which precedes Being in discourse as a discourse. Lyotard identifies this experience as that of the Sublime, which implies that “the mark of the question is ‘now’, *now* like the feeling that nothing might happen:

⁷⁸ Reinhardt, A. 1975. From *Art-as-Art: Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*. pp205-206. (Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. pp44-45).

⁷⁹ Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p43-45.

⁸⁰ Lyotard, J-F. 1989. ‘The Sublime and the Avant-Garde’. In *The Lyotard Reader*. Edited by A. Benjamin. p197.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* p197.

the nothingness now”⁸². Of course, in a sense *nothing* is always happening in discourse. This is precisely what Blanchot means when he writes that “it is towards nothingness that all literary powers flow back”⁸³.

But there is another nothingness at play in Lyotard’s statement, that is the *nothing* which cannot find its expression, or cannot be demonstrated in discourse, the nothing which is the very functioning of discourse – the *il y a* – which is equally the nothing of everything and the everything of nothing. From this apparent paradox the Sublime function is activated – that nothingness which is *not* a function of discourse, but the question which activates discourse from the position of infinite indeterminacy. According to Lyotard, the search for sublimity in the here and now involves the “fundamental task...of bearing...expressive witness to the inexpressible. The inexpressible does not reside in an over there, in another word, or another time, but in this: in that (something) happens”⁸⁴. In this sense, the *il y a* emerges as a sublime concept, inasmuch as it points to an all-pervasive atmosphere which is always expressed in discourse, and hence experienced through discourse, but it cannot be *conclusively* determined that it is contained by discourse.

Now, as was mentioned above, *minimum* exists as an expression of this place: the moment of dying, or the “nothing might happen” in Lyotard’s terms. It cannot exist as an accomplished fact, but it can be reached obliquely through “a dislocation of the faculties among themselves [which] gives rise to the extreme tension...that characterises the pathos of the sublime” (which is an idea which emerges clearly in Kant)⁸⁵. What is the mechanism of this sublime activation? According to Lyotard, it is apparent when “the art object no longer bends itself to models, but tries to present the fact that there is an unrepresentable; it no longer imitates nature, but is...the actualization of a figure potentially there in language”⁸⁶.

To return to Reinhardt’s so-called manifesto quoted above, it appears that the prohibition of existence he advocates is nothing other than a theoretical appeal to the sublime. By denying

⁸² *Ibid.* p198.

⁸³ Blanchot, M. 1981. ‘From Dread To Language’. In *The Gaze of Orpheus*. p7.

⁸⁴ Lyotard, J-F. 1989. ‘The Sublime and the Avant-Garde’. In *The Lyotard Reader*. Edited by A. Benjamin. p199.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* p204.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* p206.

every possible traditional method in the visual arts, Reinhardt attempts to recall the ambiguity of the *il y a*, and it is easy to associate this position with Lyotard's assertion that the "art object no longer bends itself to models". It is equally significant to note that literary or written discourse is the privileged place for this appeal to the sublime, recalling both Levinas' and Derrida's assertion in this regard, and remembering that we negotiate these relations *only* through discourse. What we are seeking, in short, is the unworking of the work of discourse in a way which promises to bring us to the closest possible proximity to *minimum*. This is minimalism.

Sublime. The sublime, in this light, emerges as the failure of adequate self-presentation. It is an epistemology or ethics, in a sense, romanticism follows this reasoning, but, through its "work of work", it proposes a presentation of the absolute which emerges as a self-mechanism for the construction of literary minimalism, precisely because it knows its

III.

Inasmuch as romanticism can be viewed as the inauguration of the possibility of the impossible (a view which will be demonstrated subsequently), it also presents a structural matrix for minimalism. In their groundbreaking study of romantic aesthetics, *The Literary Absolute*, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy claim that modern thinking has been "eclipsed within romanticism...perhaps this is why romanticism was able...by maintaining its proper equivocity, to make them [referring to subsequent theorists' work] possible"⁸⁷. By equivocity, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy mean "a basic indetermination, or absence of determination"⁸⁸, what they term an "ab-solution"⁸⁹, the occurrence *away from* a solution, or an inherent postponement of the possibility of final solution. The echo of Lyotard's identification that "the aesthetics of the sublime...is....indeterminate"⁹⁰ calls to our attention the relationship between the Sublime and the Literary Absolute.

They invite the bringing of the *il y a*, that space which is the *il y a* itself, the new which invites the question *is it happening as a deconstruction of the present* embodied by the *il y a*. In turning to the romantic and sublime theories of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, we can see more clearly that the role of the aesthetic, and, for the present study, literary

⁸⁷ Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. p124. It is precisely this self-constituting exteriority - which I will later demonstrate exists at a point which is exterior while still remaining interior - that is characteristic of minimalism. In this way, I hope to convince the reader that it is still possible to address the idea of the *il y a* without directly engaging Levinas' later arguments concerning metaphysics and exteriority.

⁸⁸ Barnard, P. & Lester, C. 1988. *Translators' Preface*. In Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. pxix.

⁸⁹ Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. p123.

⁹⁰ Lyotard, J-F. 1989. 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde'. In *The Lyotard Reader*. p203.

According to Lyotard, the Kantian model defines the Sublime in terms of “a kind of cleavage within the subject between what can be conceived and what can be imagined or presented”⁹¹. Critchley explains that “this weakening [of the subject] in the epistemological domain is paralleled by a strengthening of the subject in the ethical domain”⁹². The result of Kant’s proposition is the identification of “aesthetics...[as] the bridge that spans epistemology and ethics...beauty is the bridge that unites the domains of the sensuous and the intelligible”⁹³, and the aesthetic domain, therefore, presents an *ideal* place for experiencing and investigating the Sublime. The Sublime, in this light, emerges as the failure of adequate self-presentation through epistemology or ethics. In a sense, romanticism follows this reasoning, but, through its radical unworking of work⁹⁴, it proposes a presentation of the absolute which emerges as a viable mechanism for the construction of literary minimalism, precisely because it knows and constructs its own failure, in this way succeeding, in a perverse, but promising sense.

Considering Reinhardt's manifesto quoted above, it is clear that the impossibility of the project he proposes (however vaguely he defines it, or, rather, precisely because it remains so vague) introduces a similar notion of equivocity as that identified by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy in *The Literary Absolute*. Its absurdity in reality⁹⁵ – that is, that it stands so firmly against the ‘reality’ which is perpetuated from and in discourse – its effective prohibition of (final) existence, situates it quite unequivocally within this indeterminate equivocity of the Sublime. If Reinhardt’s may be assumed to be an aesthetic proposition of minimalism, how is it possible to formulate a theory to span this gaping lacuna? But, as we have seen, the negative foundations of being in language, always call us to do so. They invite the bridging of that gap, that space which is the time of dying, the *now* which invites the question *is it happening* as a demonstration of the impossibility embodied by the *il y a*. In turning to the romantic and sublime notions of equivocity, we are able to see more clearly that the role of the aesthetic, and, for the present study, literature in particular, is *not* in bridging any gaps, but in the actual construction of the lacuna itself. The principal assertion of a minimalist literature in this regard would be that since it is impossible to

⁹¹ *Ibid.* p203.

⁹² Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: death, Philosophy, Literature*. p88.

⁹³ *Ibid.* p89.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* p97.

⁹⁵ For whatever meaning this term might be considered to hold - it is undoubtedly diminished in current discourse, perhaps, above all, because it is constructed in the discourse it pretends to supercede.

pass beyond the veil into the infinite terror of the *il y a*, to delimit this experience would require us to construct the impossibility of knowing the veil as veil. For, in doing this, are we not somehow privileged, in an eternally and irrevocably oblique way, to this knowledge, which is unreachable through reason or reflection, no matter how hard we try? This is essentially the minimalism I propose as a deconstruction of discourse from within discourse.

From the writing presented in the *Athenaeum*, the journal of the Jena romantics (most notable amongst whom are Friedrich and August Schlegel, Schelling, and Novalis), Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy decipher, or perhaps translate, a complex view of romanticism. This view posits literature as "a 'genre' beyond all genres and containing the theory of this 'beyond' within itself - or in other words, at once a general theory of genres and its own theory"⁹⁶. The romantic view derives, in part, from Kant's⁹⁷ idea of the singularity of the literary work resulting in its productive and auto-productive capacity and Socratic/Platonic irony, through which "literature is inaugurated (and inaugurates itself), with all the force of the reflexive, since irony is also precisely this: the very power of reflection or infinite reflexivity"⁹⁸. In Critchley's summation, "the movement between wit and irony is a ceaseless alternation between self-creation and self-destruction", which formulates romanticism as the always unfinished project⁹⁹.

In Blanchot's estimation, romanticism offers "speech...[as] the subject...[and] if true speech is the subject, free of every objective particularity, this means that it is also only in the existence of the poet in which the pure subject affirms itself by saying 'I'"¹⁰⁰. Thus romanticism presents itself as the Absolute of the subject, the absolute possibility of the System of the Subject, the limit of discourse. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy maintain that literature, constituted by productive Subject (or subject-work) and critical Subject, cannot be simply separated, and is always

⁹⁶ Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. p86.

⁹⁷ According to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's reading of Kant's *bildende Kraft* of the organism, which involves its constitution as *individual* organism, and with which Romantic literature is easily associable, literature is defined by its capacity to produce and, moreover to produce itself as a result of its internal formative or productive forces. (*Ibid.* pp48-49).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* p86.

⁹⁹ Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p115.

¹⁰⁰ Blanchot, M. 1993. 'The Athenaeum'. In *The Infinite Conversation*. Translated by S. Hanson. p357.

constituted simultaneously as "literature as productivity and literature as reflection"¹⁰¹. From the romantic perspective, it is literature's ability to produce both itself and its own theory which explains its privileged position in discourse. It is important to note here how the auto-production and auto-reflection which constitute literature as the absolute possibility of the System of the Subject can be associated with Agamben's assertion concerning the muteness of the Voice as the source of a mute speech of Being, language and literature:

We think – we hold our words in suspense and we are ourselves suspended in language – because, finally, we hope to find our voice in language...Logic demonstrates that language is not my voice. The voice – it says – once was, but is no more nor can it ever be again. Language takes place in the non-place of the voice...So, language is our voice, our language. As you now speak, that is ethics¹⁰².

In this last assertion, that the speaking of the voice or of language, is the very constitution of ethics, it is possible to hear the echoes of Kant's notion of the Sublime in aesthetics (literature) as the union of ethics and the thinking of Being¹⁰³. But it is also the voice and the speech Blanchot identifies in romanticism:

To write is to make (of) speech (a) work, but that this work is an unworking; that to speak poetically is to make possible a non-transitive speech whose task is not to say things (not to disappear in what it signifies), but to say (itself) in letting (itself) say, yet without taking itself as the new object of this language without object (for if poetry is simply a speech that claims to express the essence of speech and of poetry, one will, and scarcely more subtly, return to the use of transitive language – a major difficulty through which one comes to discern the strange lacuna at the interior of literary language that is its own difference, in a sense its night; a night somehow terrifying¹⁰⁴.

According to Blanchot, the necessary incompleteness or equivocity of romanticism is precisely what inaugurates this literature as the project of the impossible: the discourse of the dissolution of discourse, since it knows itself as incomplete and inadequate, and hence does not invest in itself the expectation of becoming the object for a new discourse. This would be little more than a reinvestment in the System of the Subject, which is the completion of the subject in the sense of its total subsumation in discourse, the complete dissolution into the System of the Subject. Romanticism maintains a structural distance from this problem.

¹⁰¹ Barnard, P. & Lester, C. 1988. *Translators' Preface*. In Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. pxxvi.

¹⁰² Agamben, G. 1991. *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*. pp107-108.

¹⁰³ Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p89.

¹⁰⁴ Blanchot, M. 1993. 'The Athenaeum'. In *The Infinite Conversation*. Translated by S. Hanson. p357.

through an auto-productive and auto-critical mechanism within discourse, which, at once, In relation to this point, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy identify this position as hyperbolic: literature's "'auto' movement...auto-formation, auto-organization, auto-dissolution, and so on - is perpetually in excess in relation to itself"¹⁰⁵, since it occurs in the complex dialectic involving both the productive and critical, which is never completed, although its end is always being approached. Yet, its auto-production and auto-criticism assume the basic existence of this so-called resolution of the dialectic (production and criticism, which are both exclusive and inclusive). In this way, literature may actively approach the limits of its constitution in a deconstructive action of both itself and the discourse on which it is dependent – hyperbole – the discourse as the source of the literature's deconstruction of the discourse. Hence, literature exists in excess of its own possibility, the necessary possibility of impossibility. The theory of literature as inaugurated by the Jena romantics (and continuing to the present) emerges as "the necessary auto-production and the auto-production of necessity...the *Bild* beyond all *Bild*..., or in other words of the absolute"¹⁰⁶. Suspension; equivocity – these are the conditions which, in the words of Niall Lucy, result in the "presentation of the unrepresentability of the unrepresentable"¹⁰⁷: the Literary Absolute, then – a position saturated in dialectic paradox.

IV.

The Romantic project turns out to encompass considerably more than pale Wordsworthian naturalism, or some vague and hazy notions concerning the virtues of subjectivity. Romanticism, understood properly and from a theoretical perspective, inaugurates the (doomed?) project that navigates views of content, form and genre in literature. It fixes these in Literature's striving for the Absolute, which, as we have seen, can be situated within a general understanding of the Sublime as defined through ambiguity or equivocity. Although this position may never be reached in the usual sense, it must, by definition, be reached for. And it must be reached for

¹⁰⁵ Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. p92.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* p56.

¹⁰⁷ Lucy, N. 1997. *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction*. p64.

through an auto-productive and auto-critical mechanism within discourse, which, at once, reaches for and constitutes the Absolute.

This dialectic is echoed in Agamben's report of Paulhan's distinction between the Rhetorician and the Terrorist, according to which "Rhetoricians...dissolve[...] all meaning into form and make form into the sole law of literature, and Terrorists...refuse to bend to this law and instead pursue the opposite dream of a language that would be nothing but meaning, of a thought in whose flame the sign would be fully consumed, putting the writer face to face with the Absolute"¹⁰⁸. At play in this dialectic is the constitution of the Literary Absolute or the Sublime which emerge from romanticism, and which prove such useful mechanisms in the construction of literary minimalism. For, if the opposition of the Rhetorician and the Terrorist seems quite insurmountable at first, it should not be forgotten that (as in all dialectic structures) the one extreme requires the other for its validation.

What we find, in this case, is that the dreams of both the pure Rhetorician and pure Terrorist are idealistic visions which are fuelled by the same experience of binding ignorance which *all* writers confront in the *il y a*. Thus, the Rhetorician attempts to construct, and so to reaffirm the protecting veil, while the Terrorist dreams of a place before or beyond the veil. Both are utterly impotent. Absolute form and absolute absence of form are equally inconceivable. It is in the most intense imbrication of form and absence of form, in the reconciliation of the Rhetorician with the Terrorist, that the Literary Absolute becomes the most viable model for the delineation of nihilism, for constructing the lacuna between Being and absolute knowledge of Being (knowing the *il y a*, which is impossible), although it cannot allow us to cross this gap.

V.

Identifying minimalism within the overarching system of romanticism requires the presence of overt homologies between the Literary Absolute of the Jena school, and the literary-philosophical underpinnings of literary minimalism. If literature can be demonstrated by the

¹⁰⁸ Agamben, G. 1999. *The Man Without Content*. p8.

romantics as an inherently theoretical field, it follows that minimalist literature, through its formalisation or recognition *as literature*, maintains (at least to some degree) a proximity to romanticism through the channels of the literary-theoretical. Yet, in itself, this does not constitute a satisfactory link, for this condition is extremely vague. As mentioned above, what is required is the abandonment of assumptive reasoning based on surface analogies, which Bartelanffy considers “superficial similarities of phenomena which correspond neither in their causal factors nor in their relevant laws...[and which] analogies are scientifically worthless”¹⁰⁹.

In establishing these homologies (which form a satisfactory connection), the question is then: how does the minimalist work exist? In the visual arts, one of the Minimalists' chief theoretical concerns remains that of objecthood, the “theoretical rather than descriptive”¹¹⁰ orientation of minimalists towards artworks which draw attention to their material existence, that “art resides in the actual stuff in which it consists”¹¹¹. It has also been demonstrated that, by insisting on the *production* of *art-objects*, Minimalists effectively demonstrate that such objects are only ever expressions of the subject in the System of the Subject. So objecthood remains the dream of complete alterity, which is the same dream of confronting the Absolute. As the romantics demonstrate, this can only be done in the ‘auto’ structures of an equivocal discourse – an act of extreme naïvety, but, as Critchley notes, one “rooted in a self-consciousness of naïveté...an acute awareness of failure, and the limitedness of thought”¹¹². If literary minimalism is possible, if it is possible to approach minimum as that unattainable point which throws the System of the Subject into the night of the *il y a*, then the alterity of the object must be a self-constituted naïvety which knows its own impossibility, which is precisely the *possibility of this impossibility*.

Now, the minimalist proclivity for the object is connected to the romanticism of Jena and Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy in several ways. Firstly, minimalism's incessant search for the object appears to stand in sharp contrast to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's identification of the subject-work¹¹³ as the absolute subject, the Subject *par excellence*. What is significant to note in

¹⁰⁹ Von Bartelanffy, L. 1968. *General Systems Theory*. pp84-85.

¹¹⁰ Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p112.

¹¹¹ Richard Wollheim. In Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p106.

¹¹² Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p97.

¹¹³ To reiterate, the subject-work is defined by Barnard and Lester as “the paradigmatic model of the romantic subject's auto-production in the (literary) work of art”. (Barnard, P. & Lester, C. 1988. *Translators' Introduction*. In

this operation is that the absolute subject can only be reached (for) through “the cleavage within the subject”¹¹⁴. In other words, the subject as constituted through the Literary Absolute is present as a radical unworking of the System of the Subject through its own language - discourse.

Turning to existing literature, Alain Robbe-Grillet, often identified as a proto-minimalist¹¹⁵, says: “However strong the theoretical opposition seems to be between the absolute subject and absolute object, it cannot be forgotten that the subject-object dichotomy functions as a single dialectic, as part of a single system, which is to say the System of the Subject. According to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's theory discussed above, the ultimate romanticism, or the end of romanticism, is locatable precisely in its equivocity, its inconclusion. The end is non-ending, infinity or the Literary Absolute. The subject proves to be inconceivable, ultimately deferred (in Derridaean terms), and it follows that, just as the final subject cannot be finalised or contained, so too the object in its most absolute sense, being the opposite pole of this subject-object dialectic, appeals to the same idea of the Literary Absolute. In essence, the equivocity of both the subject *par excellence* of romanticism and the object of minimalism proves to be the attempt (through the production of auto-critical and auto-productive literature) of literature to overcome the imprisonment imposed through discourse – the theoretical presentation of the lacuna which separates discourse from the forever-lost language *prior-to-the-first-language*, to recall Derrida. This is again the presentation of the moment of dying, which is rooted both in discourse and in the absence of discourse, the time of the Sublime, the *is it happening?*, the response to a *now* which is unworked as a radical absence of discourse in discourse.”

On closer inspection, the minimalist search for pure objecthood proves to be nothing other than a search for the Sublime, a reactivation of Romantic notions of “the thinking of identity through the mediation of nonidentity”¹¹⁵ – what Critchley defines as “the experience of language unworking itself in an irreducible ambiguity that points towards...a dizzying absence, the space

Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. (p. xi). In other words, the subject's productive ability, that is, the productive ability of Literature – for literature, under the conditions of romanticism, turns out to be nothing other than the infinitisation of the subject, the theoretical completion of the Subject – which is, ultimately, both productive in the sense of work (the work of unworking, in a particular sense) and reflection, is contained in Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's conceptualisation of the category of subject-work.

¹¹⁴ Lyotard, J-F. 1989. ‘The Sublime and the Avant-Garde’. In *The Lyotard Reader*. p203.

¹¹⁵ Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. p46.

of dying itself”¹¹⁶. What is at stake here, again, is the inconceivability of absolute minimum, of the absolute dread and terror of the absolute object.

Turning to existing literature, Alain Robbe-Grillet, often identified as a proto-minimalist¹¹⁷, says of the new literature he inaugurated¹¹⁸ that it is “not concerned...with that naïve preoccupation with objectivity which so amuses the analyst of the (subjective) soul. Objectivity in the current meaning of the term...is only too obviously a chimera”¹¹⁹. Instead, Robbe-Grillet proposes a minimalism that “is neither meaningful nor absurd. It quite simply is. And that...is what is most remarkable about it”¹²⁰. For Robbe-Grillet, the blankness of creation, as such, must be reflected in the text, its composition, and the elements that constitute writing, literature and the novel. Robbe-Grillet’s is a naïve phenomenology – but not of the order of self-reflexive naïvety – one in which “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*”¹²¹. But it has already been demonstrated that the conditions for this blankness and presence as *prior* to their presence in discourse, prove false under the conditions inaugurated by the nihilistic project, since blankness or nothing is always already a construct of discourse.

It is thus unlikely that Robbe-Grillet’s prose, or for that matter the writing of recognised Minimalists, ever reaches this state, for no sooner has it attempted to present this object of which Robbe-Grillet speaks, than the very act of presentation of something other than itself makes it referential, and hence a subject. It is the phenomenological presence of meaning – in Robbe-Grillet’s terms, that the presence *is* the meaning – which Derrida criticises so effectively in *Of Grammatology*:

We are disturbed by that which, in the concept of the sign – which has never existed or functioned outside the history of (the) philosophy (of presence) – remains systematically and genealogically determined by

¹¹⁶ Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p34.

¹¹⁷ Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p106.

¹¹⁸ I believe that Robbe-Grillet’s short stories and novels remain, even today, the prose most easily associable with minimalism, certainly more so than the Minimalist works of Raymond Carver which are so clearly and unapologetically referential and yet remain most frequently called upon in defining literary Minimalism.

¹¹⁹ Robbe-Grillet, A. 1957. ‘A Path for the Future Novel’. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots and Towards a New Novel*. p52.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* p53.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* p54.

*that history...all that functions as metaphor in these discourses confirms the privilege of the logos and founds the 'literal' meaning then given to writing: a sign signifying a signifier itself signifying an eternal verity, eternally thought and spoken in the proximity of a present logos*¹²².

According to Derrida, to accept that the world simply *is*, as Robbe-Grillet suggests we should do, requires an *a priori* acceptance that the world simply *is* – an appeal to a logos, a preexistent truth, which requires itself, or formulates itself through its own presence to itself. And this presence can only ever be a presence to itself – a paradoxical impossibility, since this “verity”, which must be assumed to be absolutely absent, since it precedes from a distance, must simultaneously be regarded as absolutely present.

In other words, Robbe-Grillet’s brand of phenomenological literature requires a pre-representational representation for literature to become absolute mimesis, which is not far from the initial phenomenological assumptions Derrida criticises¹²³. Even Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that “elementary perception is already charged with a *meaning*”¹²⁴ implies the oversimplistic bias of Robbe-Grillet’s position. Indeed, for Merleau-Ponty, it is the act of perceiving the world which gives it its status as the world which *is*. So, in a sense, Derrida and Merleau-Ponty are partly in agreement that to assume the existence of a world which simply *is*, requires its construction, through some sort of master-text or master-discourse¹²⁵. It is clear that these ideas form the basis of the inescapable System of the Subject. The object dreamt of by Robbe-Grillet proves to be always already a subjectification, in its recognition through perception or signification. The minimalist object *par excellence* must be inscribed in the impossibility of the Sublime, that is, as the limits of the System of the Subject, rather than as the tacit recognition of the mastery of this System.

¹²² Derrida, J. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. pp14-15.

¹²³ See, for example, West, D. 1997. *An Introduction to Continental Philosophy*. pp178-180.

¹²⁴ Merleau-Ponty, M. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*. p4.

¹²⁵ In Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, *perception* acts as a master-discourse, whereas Derrida claims that the (problematic) assumption of a transcendental signifier (which he proceeds to deconstruct) is the prerequisite which acts as master-discourse.

VI.

Secondly, and closely related to the subject-object dichotomy, is the homological line which can be drawn in the tension between romanticism's focus on the singularity of each work, and the minimalist tendency towards nondifferentiation. According to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, as a consequence of the fragmentary nature of romanticism's project¹²⁶, "individuality is above all that of the multiplicity inherent to the genre...totality is the fragment itself in its completed individuality"¹²⁷. According to Blanchot, the paradoxical structure of romanticism proposes "the necessity of contradiction...romanticism does no more than confirm its vocation of disorder"¹²⁸. Now, according to this vocation, the singularity of the work emerges as a result of its laying claim to the entire literary project. Blanchot writes:

One of the tasks of romanticism was to introduce an entirely new mode of accomplishment, and even a veritable conversion of writing: the work's power to be and no longer to represent, to be everything, but without content or with a content that is almost indifferent, and thus at the same time affirming the absolute and the fragmentary; affirming totality, but in a form that, being all forms – that is, at the limit, being none at all – does not realize the whole, but signifies it by suspending it, even breaking it...[Literature] suddenly becomes conscious of itself, manifests itself, and, in this manifestation, has no other task or trait than to declare itself. Literature in short, declares it is taking power¹²⁹.

According to this aesthetic concept, every work is ultimately incomplete, and it is this incompleteness which results in each work's utter individuality, since its inherent equivocity means that the likelihood of similarity is reduced to nil. And, in the self-affirmation of romantic equivocity, literature emerges as the speaking of its own totality. This is also the disclosure of itself to itself as the total privation of the Voice of literature, which Lyotard identifies with the sublime¹³⁰. In other words, in taking power, literature proclaims itself as the *everything* which is entirely singular, but as soon as it realises this, it is already fragmented, equivocal and chaotic.

Critchley quite explicitly identifies this power in the romantic fragment:

¹²⁶ Which is demonstrated in the *Fragments* as they were constructed for and published in the Jena journal, *The Athenaeum*.

¹²⁷ Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. pp43-44.

¹²⁸ Blanchot, M. 1993. 'The Athenaeum'. In *The Infinite Conversation*. Translated by S. Hanson. p352.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* pp353-354.

¹³⁰ Lyotard, J-F. 1989. 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde'. In *The Lyotard Reader*. p211.

*The fragment...is a form that is both complete and incomplete, both a whole and a part. It is a form that embodies interruption within itself. That is to say, the fragment fails. Thus, the success of Jena Romanticism is the development and deployment of a genre that embodies failure within itself, whose completion is incompleteness, whose structure is essentially ambiguous*¹³¹.

If the fragment is the ultimate romantic presentation, then it is due to its ability to simultaneously call to mind unity and difference. The fragment is the romantic genre in difference to itself and to all other genres. The singularity of the fragmentary work differs precisely because it is a fragmentation of *the* work, an unworking of the work. But it is simultaneously the totalisation of the work through its construction of the lacuna of the moment of death *in literature*, of its recall to the *il y a*. As Blanchot writes:

*Romanticism has the keenest knowledge of the narrow margin in which it can affirm itself: neither in the world nor outside the world; master of everything, but on condition that the whole contain nothing; pure consciousness without content, a pure speech that can say nothing. A situation in which failure and success are in strict reciprocity, fortune and misfortune indiscernible. But becoming everything...[it] has also immediately lost everything, thereby reaching the strange era of its own tautology*¹³².

Many minimalists have proclaimed a desire for nondifferentiations of various orders, which is to say that the minimalist work desires to be entirely non-distinguishable, non-differentiated from the world. Strickland describes La Monte Young's conceptual Minimalism as a "contamination of the artistic ambiance and merging of 'art' and 'life'"¹³³, proceeding to identify "the central question in Stella's black paintings [as] the evasion of relations"¹³⁴. These paintings attempt to reach for an absolute objecthood by minimising their difference from, and simultaneously their relationship to, other works. At the same time, we must recall that the Minimalists were convinced that they were creating objects as "real existing thing[s] existing in the world, without illusion or formal prototype"¹³⁵.

It has been demonstrated that these claims are problematic in the light of the restrictions imposed by existing in the System of the Subject. But, when applied to literature as conceived by the radical unworking of the Literary Absolute and Sublime, this paradoxical proposition emerges

¹³¹ Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p106.

¹³² Blanchot, M. 1993. 'The Athenaeum'. In *The Infinite Conversation*. Translated by S. Hanson. p356.

¹³³ Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p139.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*. p101.

¹³⁵ Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p107.

with all the strength of literary-theoretical romanticism. Minimalism, as a function of the Sublime aspect of the Literary Absolute, exists within the profound equivocality of romanticism. It is an appeal to both undifferentiated totality (an apparent unity with and within the world, but, in the sense that it is auto-constructive and auto-reflexive, it is also in a position far superior to the world as constructed in the System of the Subject, as it is, in this respect, the deconstruction of this same system) *and* singularity, since the minimalist work is always incomplete and ambiguous, for the Sublime must always find its frustrated expression from within discourse.

The singularity and totality of a minimalist literary work is therefore embraced in a nihilistic turn. In practice, this position may result in the production of works which exist both as unified objects (as constructed in the System of the Subject) in themselves, in other words, literary works containing no referentiality, as well as in works unified with the ultimate end of their production, nihilism, which is the deconstruction or delineation of the System of the Subject. Their unity is also their incompleteness, which we have already seen is characteristic of the Jena romantics' "development and deployment of a genre that embodies interruption and failure within itself"¹³⁶. In literary terms, this might involve the presentation *as literature* of objects which do not inherently signify literature. In this way, minimalist literature would involve the simultaneous presentation and dissolution of the presentation, to which Niall Lucy refers in the earlier quotation¹³⁷. Minimalist literary works, although they seem singular, and unified in this singularity, are simultaneously part of a unified movement of self-dissolution which ends in the construction of the gap which separates Being from the place of the *il y a*, the end which is sought but never reached – really the same end as the romantic Literary Absolute – absolute, that is, away from completion, quite *apart* from a final state.

VII.

A third homology finds its expression in the reemphasis of an absolute space, that lacuna which is unapproachable except through a technology or mechanism such as the Literary Absolute –

¹³⁶ Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p106.

¹³⁷ See page 60 and note 106.

that space in which both romanticism and minimalism are “approachable only in the ‘in-between’¹³⁸, that is, in between substantiality and insubstantiality in essence. In literary terms, this gap finds a uniquely applicable expression in the concepts of form and genre. As we have seen from Agamben’s analysis, the Rhetorician seeks the perfect form, while bridging the gap of the moment of dying implies the total absence of form¹³⁹. But, as we have also seen, all debates are always already trapped within the so-called macro-form of discourse, which I have called the System of the Subject. The question, then, is: are romanticism and minimalism able to posit a view of genre and form which at once acknowledges this *a priori* imprisonment, while still offering a deconstruction of the same?

A study of Minimalist aesthetics reveals a considerable effort to defy traditional generic classification. For example, the sculptor Carl Andre seeks to counteract the confines of the sculptural base – which is a traditional signifier of sculpture – attempting to meld sculpture with the environment. In much of Andre’s work, the very Genre of *what constitutes art?* is challenged. Colpitt claims that “Andre succeeded in squeezing out sculptural space to the point of near two-dimensionality. The complete horizontality of his pieces effectively eradicated issues of the base. The object is transformed into a place-marker”¹⁴⁰. These Minimalist ‘floor-pieces’ attempt to transcend traditional sculptural restrictions and generic expectations, that sculpture should occupy positive, or three-dimensional space. However, as we have seen repeatedly, these works struggle to escape the paradox of artistic genres precisely because they remain ignorant, or choose to remain ignorant, of this paradox.

Although the scope of the present study does not include a detailed account of Minimalist art and its relationship to a theoretical minimalism, what does emerge through this brief interlude is a clear challenge to traditional generic division. Considering these innovations together with Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s understanding that the romantic project is the inauguration of a theory of literature, of literature as “a ‘genre’ beyond all genres and containing the theory of this

¹³⁸ Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. p28.

¹³⁹ See page 61 and note 106.

¹⁴⁰ Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p39.

‘beyond’ within itself”¹⁴¹, the generic implications of literary minimalism are quite startling. If one of minimalism’s principal aims is to present itself as the search for an absolute object, then, much like romanticism, it contains the presentation of its own formative theory. A minimalist literary work in search of objecthood is hyperbolic in its expression as an absolute genre. In much the same way as romanticism (according to the Jena romantics) creates for itself an absolute expression in literature, so too does minimalism.

To return to the genre of the fragment, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy describe it as “a microcosm of the Work. But also...as putting into-work of the work, it operates as a sub-work and as a super-work”¹⁴². This assertion by the two philosophers draws into the equation the question of form, and, as we have seen, the theoretical nihilism of the minimalist work dreams of an absence of form. Yet, literature without form does not exist, for how can it be considered literature if it is ultimately chaotic. Form is the first condition imposed by the System of the Subject. Yet, formlessness is the very paradoxical suggestion of minimalist literature. In the opinion of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, “the formation of form demands...the putting-into-form of this formation”¹⁴³, which they identify with the auto-critical activity of literature: “the necessity of giving form to form actually indicates the absence of Form in all form, and demands that Form be restored, completed, or supplemented in any given form”¹⁴⁴. What Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy recognise here is the same paradox which occurs in minimalist literature – its desire to dispense with form, to transcend form (and hence genre) is simultaneously its appeal to Form, an absolute form which precedes in theory only, and struggles eternally to be restored to literature in practice.

Another related homology between romanticism and minimalism exists in the notion of genre. According to Derrida, “the genre has always in all genres been able to play the role of order’s principle”¹⁴⁵. Minimalism exists as a genre – that much is clear. But *minimalism* exists as a genre as well, albeit as an appeal to the absolute of genre, a radical unworking of genre then, in the

¹⁴¹ Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. p86.

¹⁴² *Ibid.* p48.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* p105.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p105.

¹⁴⁵ Derrida, J. 1992. ‘The Law of Genre’. In *Acts of Literature*. p252.

construction of this gap which is also the moment of formation and of lost generic unspecificity. Literature exists as the absolute genre, the absolute of Genre. As Derrida writes: “it is possible to have several genres, an intermixing of genres or a total genre, the genre ‘genre’ or the poetic or literary genre as genre of genres”¹⁴⁶. In this regard, the equivocity of minimalism, when identified as a progression of the romantic project, results in its being a genre within the Genre of Literature. But it is also the absolute genre, since, like Jena romanticism, its simultaneously auto-productive and auto-critical constitution refracts it towards the Sublime. The end minimalist writing seeks is dispassionate deconstruction, an ignorant knowledge of the gap which is the time and place of its dying, its oblivion. It dreams of drawing a total blank.

VIII.

It is this place of interminable clamour, of irreducible equivocity, which may be defined as the Minimalist Sublime. As has been demonstrated, it is this same place which is the very limit of the subject, the subject as it becomes fragmented through its ambiguity and the self-conscious expression of its failure to constitute reality (since reality is always already lost). However, a gap always remains as we reach past the subject, or the construction of reality, towards the absolute object. We can only ever reach for but never reach. This is the ultimate frustration of ontology. At best, we may construct the dissolution of the subject. But this does not necessarily imply the attainment of pure objecthood or *Reality*, that is, a pure experience untainted by subjectivity.

To return to Reinhardt’s manifesto: what becomes manifest in minimalism is its desire for an absolute character and its appeal to the sublime. Stated otherwise, the prescription of “no” throughout Reinhardt’s manifesto is an affirmation of minimalism’s presence in its absence – its foundations in the paradoxical affirmation of its foundationlessness, in the dissolution of the System of the Subject *through* the System of the Subject. As minimalism reaches for itself, for the impossibility of its status as pure object, so its conceptual and theoretical existence moves inward, towards an absolute negation and a sublime understanding of itself as the unobtainable

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p229.

object. In this way, minimalist literature is able to operate most efficiently within the general system of romanticism.

Minimalist literature, defined in this way, becomes an inherently incomplete project. Its first condition is also its last. It is inscribed in the Sublime while simultaneously empowering its impossibility through the same. Thus, when we talk of literary *objecthood*, this term should be understood as necessarily impossible. For, as we have seen, the object is never the pure object. But, through the unworking of the work inaugurated through the Literary Absolute, the minimalist object is also an object inasmuch as it is a deconstruction of the System of the Subject – that is, the lacuna which it constructs between the System of the Subject and the immediate terror and dread of the *il y a* which is unfrontable, but must always be confronted.

THE MINIMALIST LITERARY OBJECT AND THE SYSTEM OF THE OBJECT

I.

Essentially, what I wish to propose is that the minimalist subject *par excellence* demonstrates an uncanny resemblance to the functioning of the romantic subject *par excellence* because they are effectively constituted through the same process – which is to say the deconstruction of discourse or the System of the Subject through the auto-productive and auto-critical position of the Literary Absolute. Through a thorough identification as a genre beyond genre, a self-constituting whole which is also the total mastery of discourse (on the condition that discourse remains the master of *nothing*, or, perhaps, the constructor of *nothing*) and simultaneously the instance of singularity and individuality in discourse, the hypothetical minimalist work is able to exist in a unique way, the implications of which are broadly significant to literary discourse and discourse as a whole.

¹⁰⁷ See pages 31-32.

¹⁰⁸ Blanchot, M. 1993, 'The Athlete', in *The Infinite Conversation*. Translated by E. Rothstein.

What is this unique way – in other words, aside from the theoretical underpinnings illustrated above, how may we expect to encounter and experience a minimalist literary work? In order to answer this question with some clarity, it is necessary to diverge briefly to the field of media, which is associable with the idea of a macro-semiotics¹⁴⁷, and to relate these insights to the condition of impossibility exposed in the preceding discussion.

What constitutes literary discourse is, of course, open to extensive debate. But what we have seen thus far is, that in the System of the Subject, literary discourse has been able to establish for itself a position of remarkable privilege. It has accomplished this feat, firstly, by marking itself as the history or the record of discourse¹⁴⁸, and hence as the record of ‘reality’ (although this term has been demonstrated to be highly problematic). Moreover, the theory of literature, which is also *literature as theory*, as constructed through Jena romanticism and the idea of the Sublime – and which I have associated as homologous with the movement of minimalism – assigns to literature a position of the most extreme privilege, since under these conditions, literature is left with no task other than the positing of itself as the presentation of impossibility, or, to recall Blanchot’s words, “this becoming self-conscious that renders literature manifest, and reduces it to being nothing but its manifestation, leads literature to lay claim not only to the sky, the earth, to the past, the future, to physics and philosophy...but to everything, to *the whole that acts in every instant and every phenomenon*”¹⁴⁹.

Now, if minimalist literature can be considered as both totality and the absence of totality – for we have seen that the subject *par excellence* is merely a rhetorical device to indicate a doomed attempt to reach beyond the System of the Subject to the object *par excellence*, and, since *becoming nothing* is the very condition denied *a priori*, it is consequently situated in the midst of the greatest possible tension and paradox – then the position of the so-called minimalist literary object emerges as a fascinating prospect when approached via Marshall McLuhan’s theory of media. McLuhan’s celebrated proposition, that *the medium is the message*, is centred on his

¹⁴⁷ By macro-semiotics I mean those systems of semiosis or signification which may be construed from the functioning of discourses as contingent wholes. I recognise, of course, that the imposition of such semiotic structures is problematic, since we have already seen repeatedly that the sign is never at rest, as such. However, by stressing their contingency, I hope to demonstrate that such a macro-semiotics is a very viable tool in the present discussion.

¹⁴⁸ See pages 51-52.

¹⁴⁹ Blanchot, M. 1993. ‘The Athenaeum’. In *The Infinite Conversation*. Translated by S. Hanson. p355.

assertion that all media are “extension[s] of ourselves”¹⁵⁰. When we consider this statement in the light of Critchley’s presentation of Levinas’ *il y a* – of being riveted to existence, to the System of the Subject, within an atmosphere of profound terror and dread – it is possible to view media as extensions of our inability to overcome nihilism. According to this model, “the effect of the medium is made strong and intense just because it is given another medium as ‘content’”¹⁵¹. If this is the case, then meaning and content (much like their occurrence in the operation of deconstruction) are never inherently present, since they are always only the product of *another* medium. McLuhan provides the following example: “the content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph”¹⁵².

Of course, this statement is problematic in its dogmatic identification of a preestablished logos. McLuhan, broadly speaking, seems to appeal to a phenomenological emphasis on the primacy of conception and perception¹⁵³. What is significant for the present study, though, is McLuhan’s identification of an already implicit delineation or deconstruction of media within our experience of a particular medium as meaningful. It is through this operation that McLuhan is able to claim that “the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium...result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology”¹⁵⁴.

In other words, the decoding of messages in terms of content and meaning always requires of us a repositioning of ourselves within the world, so that *Dasein* is once again propelled into a dynamism and radical uncertainty which our ordering of discourse seeks to disguise. In this light, the study of media operates as the macro-semiotics of discourse, in which media may be viewed in much the same light as the *Da*, which to recall Agamben’s argument, indicates “being in the place of language”¹⁵⁵, which is “the source from which a radical and threatening negativity emerges”¹⁵⁶. There is a certain irony in the fact that progress is often gauged in terms of

¹⁵⁰ McLuhan, M. 1971. ‘The Medium Is the Message’. In *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication*. Edited by W. Schramm & D.F. Roberts. p100.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.* p111.

¹⁵² *Ibid.* p101.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.* p101.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p100.

¹⁵⁵ Agamben, G. 1991. *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*. p56.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p5.

advancements in media, that is, in the development of new media to 'carry' discourse and to reinforce the position of the subject, when these very media are also the source of a profound negativity in their total inability to defeat the looming dread of the *il y a*. The problem in this respect emerges in that the majority of media seem unwilling to acknowledge their failure in presenting either message or meaning unambiguously. If this is the case, then despite the fact that a particular medium is regarded by McLuhan as meaningful or significant only inasmuch as it is already imbricated with other media, the usual position of the medium is always one of privilege. As McLuhan notes:

Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication...Students of media are persistently attacked as evaders, idly concentrating on means or processes rather than on 'substance'. The dramatic and rapid changes of 'substance' elude these accusers. Survival is not possible if one approaches his environment...with a fixed, unchangeable point of view¹⁵⁷.

When considering literary discourse, it emerges that the majority of literary critical views assume the ascendancy of literature as *a medium*, rather than as a complex imbrication of media. The result is a logocentric view of literature as the mystical conveyor of essential truth, and moreover, its own essential truths. The failure to come to terms with the fact that literary discourse is, in fact, constituted by multiple 'layers' of media, in other words, that its content or meaning are simply other media, means that most literature is unable to deal directly with the nihilistic condition exposed by contemporary ontology. It is precisely this inability which is addressed by the romantic Literary Absolute and its expression in what I have called the Minimalist Sublime.

Literary discourse, considered as a unified medium, identifies its principal objective as the communication of the subject. In doing this, literature seeks to operate as both the reflection of reality and the creation of reality, in other words, the power of the subject to act, since 'reality', in these terms, may be considered as the power of acting or constructing. However, when we recognise the complex interaction of media involved in the creation, perception and reception of literature, then the discourse becomes a much more complex field.

¹⁵⁷ McLuhan, M. & Fiore, Q. 1967. *The Medium is the Massage*. pp8-10.

Firstly, we have recognised that literary discourse, in many respects, operates as the privileged locus of the System of the Subject. In this sense, it is also the medium for Being in general, or more accurately, the impossibility of knowing Being. What follows, then, is that literature is uniquely able to operate as the medium in which the fragmentation of discourses may be presented as a total discourse. This is an essential operational principle of the Literary Absolute, which can be viewed as a series of linguistic moves presented as a whole, although their fragmentation and equivocality is always already a tacit presence. So literature operates as a medium of language, but in a sense, due to the fragmented nature of the discourse presented holistically, language is also the medium of discourse. In terms of the presentation of literary discourse which culminates in its perception (in other words, the production of works) the media involved include inscription and typography and their interplay with light and visual perception on a concrete level, and syntax, paradigm¹⁵⁸ and phoneme on a technical level. In addition to these technical and concrete aspects of literature, there is the overtly constructed phenomenon of genre, which operates as an organisational medium.

Now, the instance of literary discourse is clearly not a simple one, since the macro-medium of literature is constituted *simultaneously* by all of the above-mentioned media, and this list is in no way complete. This makes the proposition of a minimalist literary object somewhat difficult. It is necessary to hold foremost to the impossibility of the pure object which a theory of the Minimalist Sublime identifies, and to remember that this possibility (of impossibility) operates as a sort of deconstruction of literary discourse and the System of the Subject, recalling that *minimum* was earlier defined as the deconstruction of all discourse¹⁵⁹, and that minimalism emerges as the search within discourse for the deconstruction of all discourse, or minimum. It has also become clear that literary minimalism would be a function similar to the radical unworking of the romantic fragment. However, what is minimal about minimalism, is its attempt to dispense altogether with the issues of content which haunt the romantic fragment with the eternal dread of being forced back into the System of the Subject, of which it is the delineation of the limits.

¹⁵⁸ The vocabulary of the syntagmatic/paradigmatic axiom is, of course, derived from Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*. (See Kearney, R. 1994. *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*. pp247-249).

¹⁵⁹ See pages 51-53.

In romantic literary theory, it is the self-reflexivity of the fragment which prevents (contingently, at least) its recall to a position of submission within the System of the Subject, and which enables it to exist in the paradoxical position of being both within and without the System of the Subject. I would suggest that the minimalist literary object, as produced through an appeal to the Minimalist Sublime, would be self-reflexive in a similar way, but that this reflexivity would be significantly more intense than is the case in the romantic fragment. If this is to be accomplished, then minimalist literature needs to engage the media which constitute literary discourse at their most elemental level, in order to expose the radically auto-reflexive possibilities of these media and to effectively deconstruct these media *as media*.

To return to the media mentioned above, the minimalist work might attempt to dispense with the typographical formulae which are dominant in western literature (in other words, the publisher's choice of a legible and sensible and economically viable font and font size, and the arrangement of this font in horizontal rows running from left to right and from the top of the page to the bottom, collected in a book which is bound on the left) and attempt instead to present a self-reflexive typography. Although I shall not attempt too many suggestions at this point, this typography might include the breaking up of the letters of the alphabet (whichever one may be in use in the particular work), literally the fracturing of language as it is presented in discourse. In addition, one might reasonably expect to find (in this search for the minimalist object) a large amount of *blank space*, or at least a particular interest in the typographical implications of space. Literature which appeals to the Minimalist Sublime is involved in the deconstruction of literary space and the delineation of that space which is always experienced as the negative possibility of impossibility which we find in the spectral 'absent presence' of the *il y a*.

We have already seen that the generic implications of the Literary Absolute stipulate that the work *par excellence* is inscribed as both a genre and simultaneously the genre of genre. Although the question of genre will be dealt with more fully in the section which follows, it is not unrealistic to expect that the minimalist literary work, attempting to define itself as the possibility of the impossible, or the pure literary object, would almost automatically reject genre on account of the fact that it is a central and vastly generalising organisational structure within the System of the Subject.

Likewise, it is unlikely that the minimalist work could make use of conventional syntax and literary vocabulary, which counteracts the commonly held fallacy that minimalism is somehow associable with 'plain speaking'¹⁶⁰. The reasons for this are many, but to posit a slightly simplistic explanation, minimalism, as the attempt to delineate the nihilistic conditions of Being, cannot *speak itself* in the language of ordinary discourse, or in ordinary discourse which *is language*. This position might result in several things: first, that the minimalist work makes extensive use only of isolated phonemes in an attempt to break down the 'reality' of the word; second, that the minimalist work constructs its own set of phonemes which bear little or no relation to the overt structures of western language (although it must be admitted, this activity would be virtually impossible, since spelling, more often than not, is non-phonetic); third, that the minimalist work presents arbitrary symbols which appear to function iconically, but do not (which is related to the point above regarding typographical discontinuity); fourth, that at the very least, the minimalist work substantially subverts the way in which the phonemic and phonetic elements of language are usually combined to form words, phrases and sentences.

These are only a few suggestions of what *may* occur, and should not necessarily be understood as what has occurred, or as a *limit of the possibilities* of what may occur. The intensity of the minimalist work, that is to say, recalling McLuhan, the intensity of the media of minimalist literature, rests on the fundamental paradox at play in such a work: *the presentation of the deconstruction of literary media as literature*. Stated otherwise, one might say that minimalist literature's most intense moment of auto-production and auto-criticism lies in the fact that it is the paradoxical and radical unworking of literature presented as literature. Remembering that the System of the Subject is, in a terrifyingly real sense, *all we have*, minimalist literature is able to exist as such by virtue of the fact that it is *other* to the System of the Subject, but forced into the position of presenting itself as the subject. Most significantly, this position is achieved not by literature *speaking* its alterity in this regard, but by *demonstrating* it, to recall the Wittgensteinian distinction. If we consider the romantic fragment, its position is indeed

¹⁶⁰ Hallett's claim that literary Minimalism "appears extraordinarily simple" (Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. p137) would suggest that it is commonly held that plain speaking and simple vocabulary and syntax are indeed markers of Minimalism, although Hallett does go on to emphasise that simplicity only appears as a surface trend, and that there is actually a complex design underlying it (*Ibid.* p25, 137).

equivocal, but it is also an active speaker of its own equivocality. In this regard, Critchley notes that “the virtue of the Jena romantics is not to offer a theory of the fragment, or even a stable definition, but rather a *practice* of the fragment, an enactment”¹⁶¹.

The minimalist work – although one must recognise *a priori* that there can be no *functional ontological silence* – by demonstrating itself in the infinitely ambiguous position of being the *not* of literary discourse *within* literary discourse, may be seen as the relentless but unachievable approach to the dream of the System of the Object. In response to Lyotard’s terrifying question which he claims constitutes the basis for the Sublime, “*Is it happening*”¹⁶², the minimalist work answers: *maybe/maybe not* – or, perhaps, *maybe/maybe not*.

II.

If the System of the Subject is synonymous with discourse, and if discourse functions as reality or the experience of Being, and if the *il y a* teaches us that we are always drawn back into discourse, that we are riveted to Being, then the System of the Object is another name for the impossible, what simply cannot be, or be experienced and known *in any sense (or non-sense)*. This is a point that has been raised repeatedly. However, we have also seen that a certain literary operation is able to present the unrepresentable, this impossibility. The Literary Absolute, or the Minimalist Sublime – in the end, it matters very little what name is forced onto it – operates in such a way as to make the literary object possible. It does not penetrate or escape the System of the Subject, for this cannot be done. Instead it defines itself within that lacuna which is the limit of discourse, and, in doing this, presents itself as the suspension of possibility. Although this is not the achievement of impossibility, it is, nonetheless, the deconstruction of possibility.

Before proceeding to a fuller discussion of the attempts that have been made in existing literature to approach this concept of *minimum*, which is an eternally deferred possibility, and hence an

¹⁶¹ Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p107.

¹⁶² Lyotard, J-F. 1989. ‘The Sublime and the Avant-Garde’. In *The Lyotard Reader*. p198.

impossibility, it is extremely valuable to consider precisely why this phenomenon may be described in terms of these Systems of the Subject and Object. Writing, in all its many variations, can be conceived of as a system. Of course, the paradox is already at work, because if literary discourse can be considered the discourse of the *nothing of everything*, as suggested above, then the idea of the system is equally trapped within the System of the Subject. This problem aside, science has shown us that certain systems *do exist*, and, although our perception of and reflection on these systems may be forever imprisoned in discourse (effectively reducing them to structures of discourse), it would be futile to offer endless apologies for having developed a vocabulary to describe them.

The celebrated biologist and systemic thinker, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, defines a system as “complexes of elements standing in interaction”¹⁶³, which are “circumscribed by the existence of [these] ‘strong interactions’...or interactions which are ‘nontrivial’”¹⁶⁴. From this definition, it follows that the vast majority of phenomena belong to a system of some sort, and more often, to a large number of systems. As was demonstrated in McLuhan’s complex view of media, literary discourse is no exception, and it is quite possible to reconsider McLuhan’s theory of media as a theory of systems in which the phrase “the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium”¹⁶⁵, might be translated as *the content of any system is always another system*. Indeed, in systems theory, expansion and elementisation seem infinite precisely because the reasoning is holistic, and the interconnectedness of elements is seemingly infinite.

The system of literature is, in fact, constituted by a complicated web of systems – one could recall at this point, the metaphor of the veil as a web of threads. As we have seen, conventional literary discourse makes use of words, which are themselves interactive elements constituting a complex system. Saussure’s linguistic theory divides these into the axiom of paradigmatic and syntagmatic¹⁶⁶, which occurs at every stage of writing. The sentence can be understood in these structuralist terms as containing both synchronic and diachronic systems¹⁶⁷.

¹⁶³ Von Bertalanffy, L. 1968, *General Systems Theory*. p33.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p19.

¹⁶⁵ McLuhan, M. 1971. ‘The Medium Is the Message’. In *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication*. Edited by W. Schramm & D.F. Roberts. p101.

¹⁶⁶ Kearney, R. 1994. *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*. pp247-248.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* pp248-249.

According to Barthes' discussion in *S/Z*:

*The grouping of codes, as they enter into the work, into the movement of reading, constitute a braid (text, fabric: the same thing); each thread, each code, is a voice; these braided – or braiding – voices form the writing: when it is alone, the voice does no labor, transforms nothing: it expresses; but as soon as the hand intervenes to gather and intertwine the inert threads, there is labor, there is transformation*¹⁶⁸.

Barthes' discussion supports the notion of writing as a complex system, and this passage is of particular interest in affirming the System of the Subject as a concealment of the muteness of the Voice of Being. As a system, literature and writing is subject to general systemic laws¹⁶⁹. This proposition is supported by Bartelanffy's statement that isomorphic laws imply "that there appear to exist general system laws which apply to any system of a certain type, irrespective of the particular properties of the system and of the elements involved"¹⁷⁰.

It must be recognised immediately that literary discourse, in fact the System of the Subject in any conception, exists as an open system. Bartelanffy defines the open system as "a continuous inflow and outflow, a building up and breaking down of components...maintained in a so-called steady state which is distinct from [equilibrium]"¹⁷¹. In the case of literary discourse, this state of flux – although it is in a non-chaotic flux, since we may assume that the system achieves a steady state in order to maintain its definition as a system – is clearly demonstrated in the idea that its power as subject is an active and productive one. Literature is a system of tremendous order, and, when we examine it in any detail, it becomes apparent that it is a system through which we are able to deduce order in other discourses – in other words, we may be said to 'read' discourse much as we read literature, in that we have already seen that the entire System of the Subject (and hence reality) is structured through the throwness of *Dasein* into language.

¹⁶⁸ Barthes, R. 1974. *S/Z*. p160.

¹⁶⁹ It is important to note that Bartelanffy argues most convincingly that these general systemic principles or laws do not imply an imposition. By being organised, or conceived of as a system, the elements of the system can be expected to behave in a certain way. This does not necessarily imply that to behave in this particular way is the transcendental nature of the elements, but rather that these elements function according to the structural principles of the system contingently, precisely contingent on the fact that they have been organised or arranged.

¹⁷⁰ Von Bartelanffy, L. 1968. *General Systems Theory*. p37.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*. p39.

Systemic functioning is clarified considerably by considering the function of entropy, or the probability towards equilibrium or disorder. It is, in fact, a very interesting point that, scientifically, equilibrium implies disorder while in language it has connotations of balance and tranquility. I would suggest that this occurs precisely because discourse is a highly organised and *organising* system which imposes itself so completely on our every perception. In the case of open systems, “we have not only the production of entropy due to irreversible processes, but also the import of energy which may well be negative”¹⁷².

This position is summarised in the following entropy function of Prigogine:

$$dS = deS + diS^{173}$$

where deS denotes a change of entropy by import, while diS denotes the change in entropy due to irreversible processes within the system (ie: entropic tendency towards equilibrium), which is always positive. The deS entropic value, on the other hand, may be either positive or negative. If it were negative, the system would find itself in excess of negative entropy, in other words, in the state of an open system tending towards increasing order¹⁷⁴.

Literature, under these systemic conditions, exists as an open system which is contingently stable, and which simultaneously accounts for the stability of the System of the Subject, in the sense that it is unalterably active and hence in a state of productive flux characteristic of the open system. The Minimalist Sublime’s position in this regard is particularly interesting. To return briefly to the argument of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, they claim concerning romanticism’s reaching for the Sublime, that “chaos is the state of always-already lost ‘naïveté’, and of always-yet-to-appear absolute art”¹⁷⁵. The naïvety which Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy echo here is echoed in Critchley: “knowing itself to be naïve, romanticism is still, I believe, the most plausible response to nihilism”¹⁷⁶. As a result of the homological identification of the romantic

¹⁷² *Ibid.* p41.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.* p144.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.* p144.

¹⁷⁵ Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*.

¹⁷⁶ Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p99.

Literary Absolute and the Minimalist Sublime, it is possible to identify this same naïvety in minimalist literature. If this is the case, then the fact that minimalism is self-conscious of its naïvety, which is to say the impossibility of abandoning the System of the Subject for the System of the Object, places it in the midst of this chaos identified by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy.

The identification with the Sublime makes literary minimalism a self-conscious deconstruction of the order imposed by the System of the Subject. Its construction of the moment of dying – or the lacuna, which can only be constructed and never crossed, between Being and non-Being – from within the System of the Subject is the delineation of the boundary between order and chaos, between the open system of discourse and the closed system of the *il y a*: between the System of the Subject and the System of the Object. Literary minimalism, through the function of the Minimalist Sublime, attempts to define itself as a closed system – “[a] system[...] which [is] considered to be isolated from [its] environment”¹⁷⁷ and from which “no material enters or leaves”¹⁷⁸.

Recent theories of thermodynamics teach that the universe – as the ultimate and therefore a closed system – contains an overwhelming amount of positive entropy and therefore is moving steadily towards a state of non-differentiation and thermodynamic equilibrium which is the condition of total chaos¹⁷⁹. In her discussion of systems theory and literature, Patti White contends that the instability of the universe “has for some time been considered evidence of cosmic entropy, a dispersal of energy across the system and a sign of ultimate decomposition of all structures into chaos”¹⁸⁰. White adds that “the increasing disorderliness...is really a generative chaos which makes new structures possible”¹⁸¹.

This statement by White is problematic if one interprets it to mean that, even if the final state of thermodynamic equilibrium is reached – in other words the state of maximum entropy – there will remain structures and developing structures. Such a statement is, quite simply, incorrect. However, what one can deduce from White’s interpretation, is that her identification of a

¹⁷⁷ Von Bartelanffy, L. 1968. *General Systems Theory*. p39.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.* p121.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.* p125.

¹⁸⁰ White, P. 1992. *Gatsby’s Party: The System and the List in Contemporary Narrative*. p7.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.* p7.

“generative chaos” is nothing other than the distinction between open and closed systems. The universe, being conceptually closed, a synonym for existence and the possibility of existence, must be considered closed in the sense that it cannot exceed itself. Eventually, according to the principles of thermodynamics, our universe will accomplish maximum entropy. However, traces of contingent order appear in a consideration of open systems such as the world, society and literature.

Nonetheless, White’s assertion emerges as a Utopianism if it is not balanced against the distant inevitability of equilibrium. Everything that is the world – that is our reality, or our discourse – is constructed firmly against this irreversible threat. The basic conditions of living and Being on this particular planet, which we have identified as the System of the Subject, function according to the principles of the open system. And so it would seem that the threat of the closed system which we are, like it or not, already tending towards (although the relative eternity of cosmic time makes this fact virtually entirely negligible) is nothing other than the *il y a* – our inability to deal with the closed system except through our existence in the open system. It is a position of extreme frustration and it cannot be overcome. In reconsidering the System of the Object, one could redefine it in systemic terms as the radical unachievability and yet simultaneously the inevitability of all of reality reaching thermodynamic equilibrium – it can only be guessed at, and it can only be construed from within the deepest naïvety of the open system of humanity.

Our best possibility, to return to the so-called *leitmotif* of the argument, is to construct access to the limit at which this knowledge becomes unknowable, which is the limit of the System of the Subject. It is at this limit that we find the minimalist literary object, which is neither *of the subject*, but nor is it *of the object*. And yet it is both. *The minimalist literary object exists in an open system as a structure forever attempting its own closure*. This is the endless ambiguity and equivocity of the Minimalist Sublime. Beyond is the promise of the System of the Object – and this sentence must be understood as ambiguously as possible.

III. satisfaction with a mirror? If he could, then he would neither have transgressed the prohibition, nor sacrificed his pleasures for the work.

In his celebrated essay, *The Gaze of Orpheus*, Maurice Blanchot provides the following metaphor to describe the work of the writer:

When Orpheus descends to Eurydice, art is the power that causes the night to open. Because of the power of art, the night welcomes him; it becomes the welcoming intimacy, the understanding and the harmony of the first night. But Orpheus has gone down to Eurydice: for him, Eurydice is the limit of what art can attain; concealed behind a name and covered by a veil, she is the profoundly dark point towards which art, desire, death, and the night all seem to lead...[Orpheus'] work is to bring it back into the daylight and in the daylight give it form, figure, reality. Orpheus can do anything except look this 'point' in the face, look at the center of the night in the night...and he can draw it upwards, but only by keeping his back turned to it...But in the impulse of his migration Orpheus forgets the work he has to accomplish, and he has to forget it, because the ultimate requirement of his 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, where it is essential and essentially appearance: in the heart of the night¹⁸²

What Blanchot is referring to in the writer's need to confront the absolute alterity of the night may be reformulated as the desire to cross that lacuna which always separates the System of the Subject from the impossibility of the System of the Object. If Orpheus is indeed fated to turn back, and to look at Eurydice, then the work of the writer is fated to a necessary failure. The "inspired and forbidden gaze dooms Orpheus to lose everything – not only himself, not only the gravity of the day, but also the essence of the night: this much is certain, inevitable"¹⁸³. The result is that "the work is lost...The work is everything to Orpheus, everything except the desired gaze in which the work is lost, so that it is also only in this gaze in which the work can go beyond itself, unite with its origin and establish itself in impossibility"¹⁸⁴.

Is the writer always doomed to this sacrifice? Are the conditions of great literature truly tied to the destruction of the writer in the work and the work in the writer – the impossibility of the work? It is precisely this point which the Minimalist Sublime attempts to clarify. Consider the following: if Orpheus *must* see Eurydice, this is not to imply that he must necessarily turn around to see her; he is not forced into a physical gaze. Technology! How marvelous a mirror can be in such unfortunate situations. Having approached Eurydice so carefully, could Orpheus not obtain

¹⁸² Blanchot, M. 1981. 'The Gaze of Orpheus'. In *The Gaze of Orpheus*. p99.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.* p102.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.* p102.

his satisfaction with a mirror? If he could, then he would neither have transgressed the prohibition, nor sacrificed his pleasure for the work.

Of course, the mirror I speak of is the auto-productive and auto-critical operation of the technology of the Literary Absolute or the Minimalist Sublime. Admittedly, the mirror does not provide Orpheus with the directness of the gaze, and so the resultant work will inevitably be less intense in a certain sense. Yet it is precisely this intensity of being trapped within the System of the Subject which minimalist literature promises to deconstruct. The minimalist object constructed through the so-called mirror of the Sublime exists in this way as the possibility of impossibility, rather than a mere recognition of the impossibility of the impossible, which is the realisation to which Orpheus' gaze draws the writer.

To reopen the metaphor of the veil, we find that the veil is not the veil which covers the night (or Eurydice), but the veil which covers us (Orpheus, the writer). The task of the writer in this condition is to explore the limits of the veil, and the Minimalist Sublime is the provision of a technology to accomplish this. And the products of this technology of the Minimalist Sublime? Quite simply, the minimalist object exists as an *opaque window* in the fabric of the veil.

To know what is beyond the veil is impossible. We have seen this repeatedly. The miracle of human creativity cannot accomplish this *beyond* – it is utterly impossible. What human creativity *can* do, is to delineate the limits of Being, and hence to construe nihilism through an identification of the negative in an essential negativity which always already invades Being in language. And, under these conditions, the construction of the limit of the System of the Subject at the limit of the System of the Subject – the construction of the impassible lacuna of the moment of dying – is the construction of the minimalist literary object. Although this minimalist literary object is always presented in the System of the Subject as part of literary discourse, it is simultaneously not of the System of the Subject: it is somehow constructed as an *other* thing. And this alterity is the closest we may come to seeing beyond the veil.

And yet we cannot see beyond the veil. There is a window in the veil, but it is an entirely dysfunctional window, for it is opaque and indestructible. It cannot be opened, broken or made

translucent. This is the closest we may come to the System of the Object, which is a distant and forever lost promise imprisoned in discourse. The promise of freedom is always a return to imprisonment. But this is as close as we may come, and we are always driven to discover this knowledge which is the tacit presence of the *il y a*. It is a very comforting disappointment.

BEYOND GENRE

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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 reducing techniques of compression², 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.

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.