

# Opaque windows: a theory of the minimalist literary object

by

**Marc Johann Botha**

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**Supervisor: Prof. J.A. Wessles**

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation reconsiders the term *minimalism* and its aesthetico-philosophical implications, which have been frequently misapplied. The nihilistic project's radical challenge to the idea of a stable origin or end serves as a point of departure. The conditions of contemporary nihilism point to the construction of Being within the profound negativity of language. This condition implies that *nothing* (the polar opposite of *something*) exists in the same discourse which provides meaning. Consequently, experience and perception of meaning and reality are tied to discourse. And language, or discourse, in turn is returned to Being. This condition is embodied in Levinas' concept of the *il y a* (there is), which maintains that Being is mediated by and through language and that attempts to overcome nihilism are bound by the limits of discourse and language, and consequently returned to Being.

In light of the *il y a*, minimalism emerges as an attempt to embrace the impossibility of nihilism. The discussion traces this attempt through the visual arts, music and literature. However, because the *il y a* returns the question of nihilism not only to Being, but also to the place of language, literature (the privileged place of discourse) emerges as the principal medium for asking the questions: 'what is minimalism?' and 'what is minimum?'. The study goes on to identify a literary-theoretical operation homologous to the romantic ideal of the Literary Absolute, the Minimalist Sublime. An initial distinction is established between the System of the Subject (the mediation of reality through active language) and the System of the Object (the impossibility of total alterity to the subject, under the conditions of the *il y a*). The Minimalist Sublime, by operating as a literary operation which deconstructs literary structure, demonstrates a radical unworking, which is an approach to minimum. In short, minimalist literature presents itself in the midst of an irresolvable paradox: the work which is simultaneously a literary presentation and an unworking of literature.

This claim is investigated in relation to the idea of literary *genre* as a principle of order. It is argued that the minimalist work is also the unworking of *genre*, explored in relation to Robbe-

Grillet's prose, Samuel Beckett's drama and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. It emerges that Robbe-Grillet's prose fails to qualify as minimalist writing precisely because it does not escape the binding conventions of narrative and hence also of *genre*. Beckett's drama, which is an excellent exploration of the conditions of nihilism, fails similarly, since it represents the conditions of nihilism within *genre*. It is only in certain instances of poetry, which seek to radically subvert their generic roots, that literary minimalism is identifiable.

The study aims to demonstrate that minimalist literature (as defined in the argument) presents a radical alternative to the discourse of nihilism, by unworking discourse and constructing a presentation of these conditions, which is simultaneously their deconstruction. It is thus able to exist paradoxically as the positivity of negative ontology.

#### KEY TERMINOLOGY:

System of the Subject: this term is used to describe the basic reality function of language. In other words, the System of the Subject is used as a synonym for reality. In the argumentation of the present dissertation, reality is seen as a construct of language or discourse. The condition of Being is mediated through language, and hence the System of the Subject is also used to denote the human experience of Being.

System of the Object: the term is used to denote the conceptual polar opposite to the System of the Subject. Since the System of the Subject is used to denote reality or Being, the System of the Object denotes that which is not related to Being or the experience of subjective 'reality'. Under the conditions of the *il y a*, the System of the Object turns out to be a term for the entirely *other* and a synonym for impossibility.

Minimum: following the assertion that reality is constructed through language or discourse, minimum emerges as the point closest to the deconstruction of discourse, and hence the

delineation of the nihilistic condition through discourse. Minimum, in this light, emerges as a part of discourse which is no longer involved in the so-called *work* of discourse which is the construction of reality. Minimum is therefore the closest we may come to the impossibility of the System of the Object.

Minimalism: the process within language or discourse which attempts to approach minimum, or the conceptual place of closest proximity to the System of the Object. Because it is a process, it exists as an unworking of the System of the Subject from within the work of the same paradox. Minimalism is thus a paradoxical operation based on an attempt to deconstruct discourse while still belonging to that same discourse.

Nihilism: the project in the philosophy of Being, or existing in the world, which seeks to demonstrate that the identification of an indisputable origin or end is ultimately unfounded. Consequently, all knowledge which is based on such an identification proves to be unsustainable and implies that it is based in a profound negativity.

Il y a/There is: a central term in the early philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas relating to nihilistic ontology. According to the idea of the *il y a* (there is), we are unable to accomplish or adequately express an 'outside' to Being, and we are thus riveted to existence. Levinas describes this condition as an atmosphere of the profoundest dread and horror which is simultaneously all-pervasive and absent.

Dasein: the German term for Being-in-the-world (being-there). In Martin Heidegger's phenomenology *Dasein* or Being is closely associated with language. According to this view, *Dasein* finds its expression in the negative foundations of language.

Da: according to Heidegger's phenomenology, *Da* indicates the place of language. According to this philosophy, *Dasein* or Being, is always already thrown into *Da*, or the place and taking-place of language.

Unworking: in contrast to the constructive work of the System of the Subject, which is the construction of reality through language, unworking refers to the deconstructive process by which the System of the Subject's constructive position, or work, is called radically into question.

Literary Absolute: a romantic literary operation which attempts to establish a literature which is simultaneously within and beyond the traditional systems, structures and genres of literature achieved through the exposition of a complex paradox relating to the unworking of literature.

Minimalist Sublime: a literary operation similar to the romantic Literary Absolute in its foundation in radical paradox and its emphasis on the unworking of literary structures, but identifying itself primarily as a approach to minimum in addressing the question of sublime presence, 'is it happening?'.  
A THEORY OF MINIMALISM

Constituent Media of Literature/Writing: an idea based on Marshall McLuhan's claims that all media are constituted by a complex imbrication or intertwining of other media. In the case of literature, the media of syntax, words, and so forth, are made up simultaneously of phonemic sounds as well as letters (positive space) and blank space (negative space). These, in turn, are made up of physical media such as ink and paper, in the case of printed literature. These are thus the constituent media of literature or writing which literary minimalism attempts to isolate and present at their most elementary level as an unworking of discourse.

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**KEY WORDS:**

Literary theory; minimalism; nihilism; negative ontology; systems theory; System of the Subject; System of the Object; Literary Absolute; Minimalist Sublime; Critchley, Simon; Robbe-Grillet, Alain; Beckett, Samuel; L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry; Concrete poetry; Carver, Raymond; Blanchot, Maurice; Levinas, Emmanuel; Derrida, Jacques; Lyotard, Jean-Francois; Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe and Nancy, Jean-Luc; Agamben, Giorgio.

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## FOREWORD

The following study represents an attempt to re-approach the topic of minimalism from a theoretical as opposed to a largely critical perspective. It is my observation that past studies of minimalism have mostly been centred in surface aesthetic qualities, at the expense of establishing so-called ‘deep’ or theoretical homologues between works. The principal aim of this study, then, is to establish a viable theoretical model for minimalism, that is, a philosophico-aesthetic model which takes into account the principles in which minimalism may be founded, as well as the realisation of these principles in works of art. In particular, this study will focus on literature, or the search for what I will later define as the minimalist literary object.

Due to the scope of the study, certain omissions have been necessitated. Although it would arguably be better to focus on the literary products of a single language group – in this case English – due to the nature of the theory being proposed, I have turned to a somewhat wider linguistic spectrum of texts. However, I acknowledge, first, my greatest incapacity: I am largely monolingual. Consequently, I have had to turn to translations of certain key texts, including those of the philosophers Blanchot, Derrida, Levinas and Agamben, as well as certain literary texts by Alain Robbe-Grillet and François Dufrêne. Due to the nature of the study, which, in many respects, exists as a study of literary ontology, or ontology through literature, I consider the original language of the text less important. The main concern at hand is a radical reinterpretation of the basic stuff of literature, which certainly has trans-linguistic and transnational implications.



PART ONE  
INTRODUCTION

The study is divided into four sections. The first, an introductory discussion, aims to introduce the pivotal issues relating to the present intersection of nihilism and literature. It goes on to address some of the key concerns of the canonized Minimalist movement which emerged between 1950 and 1970, relating these concerns to the nihilistic project. The second section proceeds rapidly with a theoretical discussion of what the term minimalism has come to mean in relation to what it could potentially mean. This section aims to provide a theoretical model for the establishment of a contemporary literary minimalism in both critical and creative terms. The third section aims to deal with the implications of this theory within existing literary discourse, and consequently undertakes a selective examination of the three main genres of writing, prose, drama and poetry, with an accompanying examination of selected literary works deemed relevant. The fourth, and concluding, section provides a brief summary of some of the key issues discussed in the study.

A rigorous study of the foundations and implications of literary minimalism as a philosophico-aesthetic movement is long overdue. It is my sincerest hope that this study will at least begin to expose some of these issues and their (largely unexplored) possibilities.

MB.

2003.

## PART ONE INTRODUCTION

### CONFESSIONAL

#### I.

I begin my approach in confession. True, it is a manipulative rhetorical ploy. And this is very close to the subject. For literary discourse is always manipulating us into false consciousness.

I begin in a confessional, the *space* of confessions. Discourse is always the space of confessions, mostly accidental confessions. Discourse is concealment through the imperative of consecution – the endless play of confession and counter-confession and inter-confession. May I convince you of my sincerity?

May I convince you of that which is always in greatest doubt to myself? This is, then, the space of my lack of conviction in my own conviction – or my conviction of myself as convict. The crime is incompleteness. The crime is incapacity for completion, my incapacity. I must confess before the crime is committed, because the crime has already been committed – it is the *a priori* crime for which there is no suitable punishment or penance, because there is simultaneously no crime. Incapacity is the crime of discourse, and as I now construct myself in this discourse of writing, I always construct myself in a discourse of some sort. The crime is always there, yet it is never there, because I have no knowledge or awareness outside of the crime. There is no norm against which I can weigh this criminality.

My penance is my crime – they are the same thing. They are inseparable – the binding ignorance of subjectivity. As close as I get to *knowing* that there is the possibility of the objective and the object, the greater their ungraspability. The sentence is harsh – life imprisonment, or more properly, imprisonment in life.

*Confiteor*. Beyond my crime I see nothing. I confess my incapacity. Beyond my sentence I see nothing. And already the rhetorical trick of discourse is at work. For this is precisely the topic at hand. Beyond my crime and my sentence I see nothing *but* my crime and my sentence, for the workings of discourse have constructed before my face a veil so thick, so intricate, that I can only see this veil. And it is a veil of my own weaving as well. Layer upon layer of effusion which is my history and all our histories and the history of literature as well. A veil so cunningly embroidered that I believe I can find a point of exit, but as I move closer, the dropped stitch, the worn fabric betrays it to me again. It is the same veil Zygmunt Bauman describes in terms of “a massive and continuous cover-up operation...a thin film of order that is continuously pierced, torn apart and folded up by the Chaos over which it stretches”<sup>1</sup>. Bauman’s metaphor calls to mind a barely-functional veil, one woven from the implicit postponement of the project of Reason in modernism (“the perpetual not-yet...the *elsewhere* of any place and the *some other time* of any moment”<sup>2</sup>) and destroyed by the Chaos he sees confronted in postmodernism (“little is left to galvanize the old creed...and to keep alive the old hope that at the far end of the development saga an orderly, rationally designed and managed world awaits”<sup>3</sup>).

I confess that I am unable to proclaim nihilism with the confidence of Bauman, although I have admittedly oversimplified his statement and the particularities of his argument<sup>4</sup>. Yet, in my view, what Bauman fails to account for from the outset, is that a discourse of Chaos (or of nihilism) is still a discourse. The tearing of the veil is merely an action embroidered with an unusually persuasive thread (a painting of a window is not a window, regardless of how convincing it seems to be). I confess I am unable to see nothing. I am unable to imagine the unimaginable or express the inexpressible. And this sole challenge is, as Simon Critchley suggests, “a matter of finding meaning to human finitude”<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Bauman, Z. 1995. *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality*. p14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p21.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p33.

<sup>4</sup> Which is a most relevant and excellent one, and to which I shall return in subsequent argumentation.

<sup>5</sup> Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. pp24-25.

Confined within discourse, we are bound to a certain inevitable series of possibilities. We may accept blindly the constructions of discourse, the theism of countless generations, placing our faith in an imminent exit. We may form a reactionary thesis such as Nietzsche's doctrine of *eternal recurrence*, that "everything becomes and returns for ever, – *escape is impossible!*"<sup>6</sup>, that we are confronted by our confinement in discourse and it is the task of the human spirit to overcome this nihilism. Or, as Critchley suggests, "it is a question of *delineating nihilism*"<sup>7</sup>, of exploring the limits of this discourse within which we fluctuate, for ultimately, it is the experience of this limit that may be the most honest activity of living.

Which is to say, at the limits of the fluctuations of discourse, we do not find silence. We find the limit. And beyond – who knows? But, perhaps there is an increased awareness, an increased pleasure in the flux. And this, also, is paradoxically the nihilism and the hope of writing, for which I confess a particular fondness.

## II.

In my mid-teens I was profoundly inspired by the writings and music of John Cage. I discovered in his art a total conception for the first time – a continuous pushing of aesthetic limits through an unwillingness to acknowledge the liminal, evidenced in his summation of himself: "get out of whatever cage you're in"<sup>8</sup> – an inspired utopianism! I do not recall how or when I first encountered minimalism, but I do remember listening to Philip Glass' opera, *Einstein on the Beach*, incessantly during my final school examinations. I also remember responding to the sound of the term *minimalism* and a vague identification with monochrome canvases, as bizarre as it may sound.

## IV.

The relationship between minimum and maximum is a complex one, and one which

<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, F. 1964. 'Eternal Recurrence'. In *The Will To Power*, Vol. II, Book IV. Translated by A.M. Ludovici. p424.

<sup>7</sup> Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p12.

<sup>8</sup> John Cage. In Kostelanetz, R. 1989. *Conversing With Cage*. p284.

III. If, as Wittgenstein says, we need to conjure an awkward (but necessarily so) understanding of meaning, in the master-discourse of metaphysics, meaning emerges as the product of our highest ideals (which

I shall presently return to the question of minimalism or Minimalism, but an initial departure may be more properly sought through the term *minimum*. The Latin root *minim-* indicates the superlative form of small or little. Having ostensibly dispensed with the polarity of masculine-feminine gender, the English noun *minimum* presents an abstraction of the adjectival function which dominates its Latin usage. It is noteworthy that the neuter form (-um) is adopted for this function, for *minimum*, in proper usage, suggests slipping away – that is, the slipping away not only of gender, but of a certain specificity as well. *Minimum* comes to us in language as the smallest recognisable presence. But, to acknowledge the powerful prescriptions of the word, we must move beyond the idea of abstraction. *Minimum* may, theoretically, be reached in many ways, including both radical reductions from complexity as well as an immediate conception *as* minimum. And what is at stake in the idea of a minimum is really everything – that is, the minimum is the *least possible*, so it is the most subtle and evasive point we can fix before everything ceases to be. It is the eternally approached negative limit of possibility, the last miniscule marker we may grasp before total ungraspability.

It seems reasonable to expect a connection between minimalism (or Minimalism) and the rather vague idea of minimum suggested above. Or perhaps I assume too much? I do not think so. So when the term *minimalism* comes into play in art (in its broadest aspect), we are really talking in terms of the potential relationship of art to the minimum. Now, this is a position which art rarely occupies, despite many claims to the contrary. In fact, I suspect that nowhere is the veil referred to above more keenly constructed than in art: the veil as art, or the art of the veil.

#### IV.

The relationship between minimum and meaning is a complex one, and one which I shall not pretend to fully comprehend, for I have ready access to neither minimum nor meaning, as such. However, I shall suggest a few guiding postulations.

Firstly, we need to conjure an awkward (but necessarily so) understanding of *meaning*. In the master-discourse of metaphysics, meaning emerges as the product of our highest ideals (which both Nietzsche and Heidegger criticise<sup>9</sup>), ideals which are typically identified as some preexistent and preminent *logos*, in Derrida's terms<sup>10</sup>. According to such a *logocentric* view, which (it must be stressed) is still, in practice, the dominant one, meaning has an eternal source, whether it be located in the religious notion of theism, the Kantian definition of *Reason* and the *Idea*, or a phenomenological notion of *essences*, either *essential dialectics*, as in Hegel, or the Husserlian notion of *essences*. Of course, this is a vast oversimplification of the terms.

In the confines of this reasoning, meaning is imparted, like a magical gift, in fact, like a gift of magic – meaning *is* reality. The various semiotic systems (to which Derrida's deconstruction is related, if not explicitly part of) have served, to some degree at least, to destabilise the incontestability of meaning and the assumption of its presence<sup>11</sup>. What then does meaning *mean* today? The question, ironically, provides a possible answer. In asking for a meaning of meaning, we strike upon its essential nature, that is, the inextricable entanglement of meaning and discourse. It would be an oversimplification to say that discourse *is* meaning, but certainly it may be concluded that discourse involves an interminable exchange of meaning, that is the exchange of signs for meaning, signs for signs and hence meanings for meanings, from a semiotic perspective.

And twinning the master-discourse of presence emerges another, the master-discourse of the imperative of communication – as Barbara Gail Hanson concludes in her discussion of general systems theory, “because everything is related to everything...all forms of behaviour are communication...[and] there is no such thing as noncommunication”<sup>12</sup>. Inasmuch as discourse serves the imperative of communication, communication is equally definable as the dispersion of

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Vattimo, G. 1988. *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture*. pp20-21.

<sup>10</sup> David West provides a particularly succinct summary of Derrida's critique of *logocentrism*. (West, D. 1996. *An Introduction to Continental Philosophy*. pp178-179).

<sup>11</sup> It suffices to note, at this point, that Derrida's deconstruction is not the only philosophical system associated with dispelling the presence of meaning, but this is a trend in twentieth century philosophy and literary theory which can be noted in the work of philosophers/theorists as diverse as (later) Merleau-Ponty, Barthes, Deleuze and Guatarri, to name but a few of the more celebrated of these.

<sup>12</sup> Hanson, B.G. 1995. *General Systems Theory: Beginning With Wholes*. p97.

meaning. Related to this point is the question of the Subject and its relation to meaning. Of course, the Subject is probably amongst the most difficult terms to define (I shall not attempt a definition, as such, but, again, rather make a few remarks on which I hope to expand later). In purely syntactic terms, the simplest understanding of the subject is as the agent or actant within the sentence: that part of the sentence which acts, or enables action. Taking this very limited understanding as a starting point, what seems significant here is that action always implies a subject. In syntax, the communication of action is the work of the subject, then. It is not too far-fetched to associate action with communication, certainly from Hanson's perspective referred to above, since every action communicates something. And the overarching system within which all communication can take place is discourse – that is, discourse is the system which allows us to experience communication as such.

What I wish to suggest then, from this very rapid elision, is that discourse – that which constitutes the veil which is our only view of reality – exists as the System of the Subject, the communications which are simultaneously the grounds for the possibility of communication<sup>13</sup>. There is, as Merleau-Ponty demonstrates in *Phenomenology of Perception*, no possibility of an objective perception, since perception is ultimately a dynamic and constructive process<sup>14</sup>. Similarly, the sign is not equipped with a mythical, metaphysical power. The sign is able to operate through a process of subjectification, that is, it is equipped with the power to act, or to signify and be signified and to repeat this process, through being empowered with the active potential of the subject. According to my understanding of the term, the fabric of reality (the veil) is irreducible to objectivity. Thus, when I perceive the veil, regardless of whether I choose to call it reality or *the veil*, I experience an endless play of subjects and of subjectivity.

<sup>13</sup> In relation to this point, Bauman notes that “we make roads – the only roads there are and can be – and we do this solely by walking them”. (Bauman, Z. 1995. *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality*. p17). If one translates this metaphor to the one of discourse as the veil, then, essentially what Bauman proposes is that we are always involved in discourse, but that the only way we can construct discourses (and hence perceptions of reality) is through discourse. Thus, discourse exists as communication, but also as the grounds for communication.

<sup>14</sup> According to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, perception constitutes our basic contact with reality. In talking of how meaning is experienced, he says that “memories do not by themselves project themselves upon sensations...one admit[s] an original text which carries its meaning within itself, setting it over and against that of memories: this original text is perception (21). A principal concern remains the purposiveness of perception, according to which, “the word perception indicates a *direction* rather than a primitive function”(12). (Merleau-Ponty, M. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*. p12, 21). It is important to note that the notion of perception as a *direction* necessarily reestablishes its dynamic, active nature and incompleteness.

To restate the case another way: according to Critchley's analysis of Hegel, "the Subject...is the power of the negative"<sup>15</sup>...which is able to dissolve that which stands over against it as an object in-itself and translate it into something for-itself"<sup>16</sup>. Now, clearly this is one of the methods whereby Hegel is able to construct such powerful oppositions such as that between true subject and true object. However, if for a moment we consider how the self as subject is simultaneously a complex constitution of signs, then the central paradox emerges. On the one hand, I can only ever perceive from myself outward, so I affirm myself, in this way, as the active subject. On the other hand, I am undoubtedly acted upon, and so I am the object of other subjects, and these not necessarily living subjects (technology, for example, is certainly not living in a biological sense, and yet its active role in contemporary life is indisputable). The argument can be duplicated on a semiotic level. Thus, the constitution of the individual as both subject and object is achieved in a reality of continuous dynamism. I would argue, that really, this dynamism affirms the position of the Subject and disqualifies the object. As Derrida demonstrates, there is no such thing as a transcendental signified, that is, a super-inert object which is not an actant.

To return to Critchley, "the Subject produces itself through a relation with death"<sup>17</sup>. In terms of the veil-metaphor, what constitutes death is that which we assume lies beyond the veil, the utterly alien. Thus, the Subject, according to Critchley, is that which is able to maintain itself in the face of the annihilation promised by the radically unknowable. And, since we place everything we know or experience against this impenetrable alterity, and we situate everything we know within the discourse of the *meaningful*, it is possible to assert, with mild confidence, that discourse is both the System of the Subject and the System of Meaning.

<sup>15</sup> The 'power of the negative' which Critchley identifies is related to our negative ontological foundation in language and will be explored in some detail later.

<sup>16</sup> Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p53. Since Levinas' idea of the *il y a* will later emerge as a central term in the present discussion, it may be pertinent to note that it is precisely this ethical position of the subject which Levinas criticises in *Totality and Infinity*: "Hegelian phenomenology, where self-consciousness is the distinguishing of what is not distinct, expresses the universality of the same identifying itself in the alterity of objects thought and despite the opposition of self to self...The difference is not a difference; the I, as other, is not an 'other'" (Levinas, E. 1969. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by A. Lingis. pp36-37).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p53.



What, then, is the relation of the concept of *minimum*, which I have identified as the principal concern of this study, to this system of discourse. As I said above, minimum is the final mark in the recession of discourse before it passes into the radical alterity of the unknowable, or non-existence, which is the unconfrontable with which we are all inevitably confronted. Critchley suggests<sup>18</sup> that there are certain conditions under which discourse may become “a question of establishing the *meaning of meaninglessness*, making a meaning out of the refusal of meaning that the work performs without that refusal of meaning becoming a meaning”<sup>19</sup>. What Critchley suggests here is the potential of certain discourses to embrace the impossible. If one is to delineate nihilism (as Critchley suggests) as the only appropriate response to the problems it proposes in contemporary life<sup>20</sup>, then it becomes apparent that the refusal of meaning becomes discourse’s principal work. Yet, simultaneously, the work of discourse is always already tied to meaning, since the work *is* discourse (following the argument above). But what is the meaning of this *unworking*<sup>21</sup>? The meaning is the promise of meaninglessness, which emerges most clearly in the concept of *minimum*. Since the minimum is the last vestige of meaning, it points clearly in the direction of meaninglessness. So, when we talk of the minimum of work in discourse, we are effectively saying that the concept of *minimum* is the meaning of meaninglessness, the furthest possible limit of meaning – the promise of meaninglessness, although it cannot be reached.

## V.

As I mentioned earlier, the expectation of the term minimalism/Minimalism is that it calls to mind the potential relationship of art to the minimum. I have previously described the relationship between minimum and meaning as the promise of meaninglessness. Somewhat at odds with my theory is Perreault’s statement that “there is nothing minimal about the ‘art’...What is minimal about Minimal Art...is the *means*, not the end”<sup>22</sup>. Implicit in this

<sup>18</sup> His comments here are in relation to Beckett’s work, which will be discussed subsequently.

<sup>19</sup> Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p151.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p12.

<sup>21</sup> The term *unworking* is used extensively by Critchley in relation to romanticism. (*Ibid.* pp85-138).

<sup>22</sup> Perreault, J. 1967. *Minimal Abstracts*. In *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. 1968. Edited by G. Battcock. p260.

statement is a recognition of meaning in the Minimalist work<sup>23</sup>, which would imply that it has little to do with *minimum* as I have defined it above. Perreault's Minimalism seems, rather, to engage actively the expanding discourses which constitute reality, to present itself as an active subject, a beautifully embroidered figure in the fabric of the veil which conceals that inevitability which is unimaginable.

However, this concern with meaning or meaninglessness need not be the concealed lacuna into which all attempts to approach minimalism are fated to fall. Rather, I would suggest that the intelligent approach of minimalism towards minimum involves a disengagement of meaning. Now, this disengagement is obviously not something which can be achieved easily. It has already been suggested that to escape the veil of meaning which constitutes reality is impossible. There can therefore be no conscious decision on the part of those who construct the discourses which surround minimalism to disengage meaning. What is required, then, is something in the structure of the minimalist work (or unworking) that operates, irrespective of the intentions of those involved in the discourse, to disengage meaning. It is this *something* which I hope to demonstrate as the Minimalist Sublime and the radical nature of the minimalist object, and particularly the literary object.

## MAPPING

### I.

I use the term *mapping* in a very specific sense, recalling the sea-faring Renaissance explorer mapping a shoreline for the first time. These explorers had no recourse to satellite technology or any of today's modern methods of mapping. Every cartographic inscription, was, for them, a new one. Now I cannot claim the same innocence, since nihilism, minimum and minimalism (or

<sup>23</sup> I would like to draw the reader's attention to the fact that minimalism is written here with an upper-case *m*, as Minimalism, referring thus to the sanctioned and critically recognised movement in art.

rather, historical Minimalism) are fairly well-documented, inasmuch as such purposefully evasive terms can be. However, in attempting to determine to what extent the concept of minimum and Minimalism coincide, and whether or not it is appropriate to consider Minimalism and minimalism a singular term, I attempt to recall this naïvety. For it is into the face of the utterly alien which this exercise in mapping must ultimately lead, and as such, a radical insecurity is as pointless as a zealous confidence.

Traditionally Minimalism has been associated with a certain radicalism<sup>24</sup>. It has also been accused of being mediocre and, at the hands of certain formalist critics, even bad art<sup>25</sup>. Minimalist music has had a similar reception: Strickland reports how La Monte Young's lecturer refused to grade his *Trio* (which has since acquired beatified status)<sup>26</sup> and how "during a 1988 performance...people still walked out on Young's work"<sup>27</sup>. Minimalist literature fared little better. Hallett reports that John Aldridge labeled the minimalists "talentless albeit technically proficient...writers"<sup>28</sup>. It is possible to compile massive volumes chronicling such reactions, but the point here is to demonstrate the unwillingness of the contemporary aesthetic consumer to acknowledge the viability of radical reduction in the arts, and even less, the inevitability of human finitude.

This radical tendency, which has resulted in a great deal of controversy and critico-theoretical debate, emerges perhaps most clearly in the work of the historical Minimalists (that is, Minimalism as an artistic movement). However, it resides much deeper than in the limitations of an historical movement, in what may be described as a philisophico-aesthetic reductionist trend – dynamic and continuing within the work of art. It is in light of this trend that Vattimo is able to assert that "the accomplished nihilist has understood that nihilism is his or her sole opportunity"<sup>29</sup>, although his identification of this nihilism with "a fictionalized experience of

<sup>24</sup>This radicalism may be construed from Strickland's description of its "once-outrageous vocabulary". (Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p4). A similar tendency is remarked upon in Colpitt, who suggests that art critics were unable "to deal with the radical new [Minimalist] work", which she claims is often used as an explanation as to why Minimalists were keen to express theories concerning their art. (Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. pp4-5).

<sup>25</sup>Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p125.

<sup>26</sup>Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p121.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid*. p122.

<sup>28</sup>Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel and Mary Robison*. p3.

<sup>29</sup>Vattimo, G. 1988. *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture*. p19.

reality which is also our only possibility of freedom”<sup>30</sup> is highly dubious, since in what way is this any different from the current fictions of reality constructed through the discourse of the Subject?

Nonetheless, it is significant to note a similar dynamic urgency in both Minimalism and Vattimo’s nihilism. It is in the inscription of Minimalism in an urgency similar to Vattimo’s call for accomplishment, that the paradox of the artistic Movement becomes intolerable, and requires a semantic substitution of Movement for movement – that is, a methodical search for the limits of the veil, to recall the metaphor, rather than a blind running in circles, as the wind of annihilation blows the veil this way and that, and we stumble eternally in a vain attempt to grab hold of it.

## II.

Two of Minimalism’s most respected critics, Frances Colpitt and Kenneth Baker, begin their respective accounts as follows:

*Minimal art describes abstract, geometric painting and sculpture executed in the United States in the 1960s*<sup>31</sup>.

*Think of ‘Minimalism’ as the name not of an artistic style but of a historical moment, a brief outbreak of critical thought and invention in the cavalcade of postwar America*<sup>32</sup>.

In contrast to these vigorous limitations of time and space, Edward Strickland suggests a far more liberal chronology:

*[Minimalism] is in a sense transhistorical, but to discuss it as an artistic movement...requires some chronological framework if it is to have any meaning at all as a cultural phenomenon. To call the builders of Stonehenge Minimalists is to evaporate the term; on the other hand, to date Minimal art from the 1960s is rather like dating British Romantic poetry from Tennyson*<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p29.

<sup>31</sup> Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p1.

<sup>32</sup> Baker, K. 1987. *Minimalism: Art of Circumstance*. p9.

<sup>33</sup> Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p4.

Now, these three definitions provoke a necessary examination of the role of the critic or theorist of art. The most obvious function of criticism (or critical theory) is to present, within discourse, or the System of the Subject, a pattern of meaning designed to grant both the specialist and non-specialist a greater appreciation of the artistic idea or product. In such a promotion of meaning, the critic does not essentially differ from any other person, indeed from any other information-processing system<sup>34</sup>, since our universal position<sup>35</sup> within the System of the Subject is also always a position within the assumption of meaningful discourse. What the critic can legitimately claim is a particular concern with constructing systems within which meanings may be examined. One of the dominant among these critically constructed systems emerges in the idea of the artistic *School* or *Movement* – the active and constructive grouping (or projection) of works demonstrating similarities of various kinds into a unifying and often (sadly) singularising conceptual category.

The idea of the Movement has several advantages. Firstly, it enables comparative access to gradual trends and sudden shifts in aesthetic production and theory and may make the postulation of reasons for these changes simpler, and could also serve a predictive function. The idea of the Movement often offers a practical (although ethically dubious) ideological tool which may be deployed to foster certain attitudes, allegiances and oppositions.

But there remains something highly paradoxical in the idea, although many would argue that it is a necessary paradox. The study and discipline of semiotics have demonstrated that structures of some kind are highly beneficial in discourse, arguably indispensable<sup>36</sup>. However, when these boundaries become confining and serve no purpose other than an oversimplification of the terms

<sup>34</sup> It is quite possible to consider non-human information processing systems as producing meaning as profound as any person. This is not to suggest that the human is reducible to a human machine, which renowned system theorist Bartelanffy sees as one of the “dangers of this new development...[in which we are] not concerned with people but with ‘systems’; man becomes replaceable and expendable”. (Von Bartelanffy, L. 1968. *General Systems Theory*. p10). Rather, I make this analogy to demonstrate how meaning is inescapable and that discourse, or the System of the Subject, acts as the principal condition of reality.

<sup>35</sup> And this is probably the only position I am willing to describe as universal.

<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Culler, for example, claims that “in attempting to describe the literary work, ‘structuralists’ deploy various theoretical discourses...then critical attention comes to focus...on the conditions of signification, the different sorts of structures and processes involved in the production of meaning”. (Culler, J. 1983. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism*. p20). Within the System of the Subject (discourse), a common focus on the structures underlying a work introduces often contrasting (but not necessarily conflicting) discourses. Consequently the theorist or critic is able to arrive at certain ideas concerning the role of a particular work in an otherwise overwhelming clamour of subjects.

which they initially sought to elucidate, they become problematic. In the case of Minimalism, there are several problems with the identification of the Movement which require elaboration before we are able to continue an examination of the relationship between Minimalism, minimalism and minimum.

The first and central problem is that the categorisation of a Movement as such, almost always occurs *post facto*, which would imply the artificial imposition of boundaries concerning time and space, and which (boundaries) attempt to present the Movement as incontestable historical fact. This can be clearly observed in the case of Minimalism, where, according to Strickland, some of the most minimal of the aesthetic products of the last century were created either before or after the 1960s, the period Colpitt isolates in her discussion of Minimalism<sup>37</sup>. In the case of Minimalist literature (or that literature which has subsequently been defined as Minimalist) the movement is inaugurated only in 1970 with Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*<sup>38</sup>. Raymond Carver, although his stories had been published since the early 1960s, only released his first collection in 1976<sup>39</sup>. According to Hallett, "minimalism as a definable literary style seems to have emerged as part of the phenomenon seen as 'the renaissance of short fiction...in American literature in the 1980s'"<sup>40</sup>, but it is evident that Alain Robbe-Grillet, whose efforts foreshadowed both Minimalist writers and visual artists<sup>41</sup>, had been considering radical reduction since the 1950s (and his writing is, ironically, more minimalist than any of the canonised Minimalists).

In terms of space, Baker's restriction of Minimalism to America<sup>42</sup> seems to be as absurd as Colpitt's rigid restrictions of time. The Movement, as such, is clearly already underway in the work of Robbe-Grillet in France, and I will subsequently argue that Beckett's connections to minimum – regardless whether one traces these to Ireland or France – are far greater than any

<sup>37</sup> For example, Strickland notes how the most austere and reductive of all twentieth century artists, Ad Reinhardt produced minimalist works between 1940 and his death in 1967, dispelling the notion that Minimalism can be rigidly chronologically restricted with any accuracy. (Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p40). He later claims that "if Reinhardt's...work does not qualify as Minimalist, the term has little meaning other than as a journalistic trendmarker". (*Ibid.* p22). Similarly, Strickland reports the much-celebrated Minimalist composer Philip Glass saying "'for me, minimalism was over by 1974'" (*Ibid.* p234), clearly moving beyond Colpitt's restriction.

<sup>38</sup> Strickland identifies this novel as "the prototype of the Minimalist novel". (*Ibid.* p12).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p12.

<sup>40</sup> Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. p9.

<sup>41</sup> This connection is made apparent in Strickland's association of Stella's work with Robbe-Grillet's nonreferential novel. (Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p106).

<sup>42</sup> Baker, K. 1987. *Minimalism: Art of Circumstance*. p9.

American Minimalist's. Perhaps the best example to illustrate the incapacity of the idea of the Movement is in relation to Anton Chekhov's short stories, which demonstrate a clear attempt on the part of the writer to reduce language to its simplest, meaningful elements<sup>43</sup>. What disqualifies Chekhov from the Minimalist movement has nothing to do with his writing, but rather with the fact that he is already *in* a Movement, he is a Russian Realist<sup>44</sup> or Naturalist<sup>45</sup> of the late nineteenth century, and so the destructive restrictions of Minimalism as a Movement have resulted in the limitation of his role to that of an historical precursor, regardless of the content of his work. The restrictions of time and space impose, in this way, a false linear historical causality, which very seldom proves to be as reducible as the hegemonic pressure to conform (embodied in the idea of Movement) suggests.

In addition to the problems concerning time and space, the canonisation of a Movement requires the assumption that ideas can be indissolubly linked by surface commonalities, with the result that important differences which may often define the uniqueness and importance of a particular contribution are downplayed. It is perhaps very telling that many of those artists who were barricaded behind the generalising banner of Minimalism objected to the classification. Strickland reports how the now-celebrated Minimalists<sup>46</sup>, Morris and Judd, objected to the term and that composer Steve Reich "preferred the term *musique répétitive*" (of course, one could not simply employ the English term, *repetitive music*)<sup>47</sup>. In literature, the term was rejected by both Carver and Hempel<sup>48</sup>.

<sup>43</sup> Consider Chekhov's short story, *Questions and Answers*:

QUESTIONS: 1) How can you tell what she's thinking? 2) What can an illiterate man read? 3) Does the wife love me? 4) When can you sit and stand at the same time? ANSWERS: 1) Search her premises. 2) A heart. 3) Whose wife? 4) When you're sitting in jail.

(Chekhov, A. 2002. 'Questions and Answers'. In *The Undiscovered Chekhov: Fifty-One New Stories*. Translated by P. Constantine. p194). Chekhov's use of language is clearly remarkably economic, yet incredibly insightful. That Chekhov was a master of probing the human condition through incisive, acerbic accounts of logical flaws, the innate ambiguity of words and the probability of miscommunication is demonstrated in this short story. In many respects, Chekhov's writing explores precisely the same problems Hallett suggests as characteristic of the writing of the American Minimalists. (See Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. pp25, 28-31). It is difficult to tell how Hallett's identification of "a plotless design...a delicate yet intricate pattern of tone...an objective presentation which...distances the narrative voice...and the trivial, mundane, and middle-class as subject" (*Ibid.* p31) as typical characteristics of Chekhov's short stories, differ from those demonstrated in much of Carver's (particularly early) writing.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* p23.

<sup>45</sup> Fraser, G.S. 1964. *The Modern Writer and His World*. pp51-52.

<sup>46</sup> And we must remain acutely aware of the irony of this term here.

<sup>47</sup> Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p23.

<sup>48</sup> Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. pp8-9.

Now, as Hallett suggests, this rejection may be largely the result of the extensive negative critical attention Minimalism received<sup>49</sup>. However, equally plausible is the suggestion that many of the artists involved simply could not associate with one another's work, and consequently rejected the forced association implied in the canonisation of the movement. Robert Morris' work, for example, is often described as having a distinctly Dadaist sensibility<sup>50</sup> (thrusting into artistic space objects which could arguably exist in real space as functional items), in contrast to a sculptor like Carl Andre, whose floor-pieces "succeed[...] in squeezing out sculptural space to the point of two dimensionality"<sup>51</sup>, since their setting into the actual space of the gallery floor effectively dispenses with the base<sup>52</sup> and the expectation of three-dimensionality related to the work. A sculptor like Dan Flavin, on the other hand, experimented with light, effectively "dispers[ing] space"<sup>53</sup>, since if the light is seen as the principal space of the sculpture, it exists in the intangibly three-dimensional, and is confined only in terms of the limits of the space in which it is displayed. Similar examples of profound difference can be sited between the music of La Monte Young and Terry Riley, for example.

Although Strickland's statement that, for the cultural phenomenon of Minimalism to have value... But the point here is that statements such as Strickland's – "the first and foremost criterion for my description of the work under discussion as Minimalist...is its appearance as opposed to anyone's pronouncements about it"<sup>54</sup> – should not be blindly conflated with the Minimalist aesthetic position expressed by painter Frank Stella in an interview with Bruce Glaser – "My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there *is* there...What you see is what you see"<sup>55</sup> – in order to arrive at a *true* minimalism. In other words, the fact that appearance *is* reality, in Minimalist terms, while it implies a similar focus on the objecthood of the artwork, does not insist that all these art-objects are identical in their internal and external relationships, which may be assumed by too narrow a reading of Minimalism and the imposition of inflexible boundaries in the concept of a movement.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* pp8-9.

<sup>50</sup> Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p12.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* p39.

<sup>52</sup> The base of a sculpture traditionally sets it apart from normal space and is a marker for the sculpture as artwork.

<sup>53</sup> Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p82.

<sup>54</sup> Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p8.

<sup>55</sup> Frank Stella. In Glaser, B. 1966. 'Questions to Stella and Judd'. In *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. 1968. Edited by G. Battcock. p158.



In current debate it is necessary to proceed with great caution regarding the concept of the artistic Movement. The reported “death of the academic”<sup>56</sup>, to my mind, does not necessarily imply the death of thinking, philosophy, theory or criticism, as such, but more a necessary rethinking of those phenomena we once considered certain. One of these phenomena must surely be the idea of the movement, which operates in such a way as to limit rather than allow progression. The “irreducible plurality of language games”<sup>57</sup> West notes in Lyotard’s theory of the postmodern, reverberates strongly through this argument, since the idea of the fracturing of metanarratives is also the fragmentation of the artistic movement (as a metanarrative). In this state of flux, it is precisely the semantic and dynamic sense of movement which is restored to the artistic movement. If progress is still possible, then it is the delineation of impermanence, flux and the inevitability of death and obliteration<sup>58</sup> towards which we must progress. It is the same progress both Bauman<sup>59</sup> and Vattimo<sup>60</sup> optimistically predict is enabled by the currency of postmodernity, although these arguments may differ in many respects.

Although Strickland’s statement that, for the cultural phenomenon of Minimalism to have value, it requires some chronological restriction<sup>61</sup> is valid, I question the solidity of the system on which Minimalism’s cultural currency is established. Essentially, this is a re-presentation of my central argument. Minimalism, represents, or should represent, the active delineation of *minimum*, the least possible before annihilation, and hence occurs as an attempt in aesthetics to delineate human finitude. Thus, a clear distinction needs to be made between minimalism (that is, the use of the lower-case *m*), which is this same attempt at delineation, and Minimalism (with the use of the upper-case *M*) as an historical movement, the implicit stasis of which is highly problematic, as I hope I have demonstrated adequately above. Because nihilism always presents itself as the utterly alien *other*, the unknowable other, it seems impossible that it can ever be reached and

<sup>56</sup> Storey, J. 2001. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. p151.

<sup>57</sup> West, D. 1996. *An Introduction to Continental Philosophy*. p200.

<sup>58</sup> As Critchley suggests. See note 7.

<sup>59</sup> See Bauman, Z. 1995. *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality*. p27.

<sup>60</sup> According to Vattimo’s commentary on Heidegger, “metaphysics...is not something which can ‘be put aside like an opinion’...metaphysics...may be lived as an opportunity or as the possibility of a change by virtue of which both metaphysics and the *Ge-Stell* [world of technology] are twisted in a direction which is not foreseen by their own essence, and yet is connected to it”. (Vattimo, G. 1988. *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture*. pp172-173).

<sup>61</sup> See note 32.

overcome, in the way an artistic movement claims to be able to place itself in opposition to whatever else opposes it, as a final, established and closed system. Rather, it is in the movement of minimalism, that is, a transhistorical and *unfinished* (always unfinished) approach to minimum, that I suspect we may find an effective method of delineating that terrifying and ineffable alterity of nothing which seems to torment human existence.

However, I am getting ahead of myself. Since the powers of time and space are undeniably present in every movement we undertake, it seems only proper that I (the comical and hopelessly inept cartographer) complete my mapping of the past before I propose a new course. In what follows I will briefly attempt to sketch the essential concerns of Minimalism as it occurred and occurs today, before attempting to restore to the Movement its dynamism, its movement.

### III.

The whole Minimalist endeavour, particularly in the visual arts, was accompanied by a virtual explosion of theory<sup>62</sup>. However, as Strickland emphasises<sup>63</sup>, it is important not to rely too heavily on these critical and theoretical pronouncements at the expense of the actual works produced under the Minimalist banner. A responsible approach, therefore, has to achieve a balance between the two, and it is such a balance for which I strive.

Most discussions begin with an historical contextualisation of Minimalism as an aesthetic reaction to the often overburdening demands of Abstract Expressionism<sup>64</sup>. Although there is undoubtedly a connection here, explaining Minimalism's frequent classification as a radical or

<sup>62</sup> Colpitt notes that "many Minimal artists...devoted a good portion of their time and creative energies to explaining their ideas, examining broad, theoretical issues normally left to art historians and aestheticians". (Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p101).

<sup>63</sup> See note 54.

<sup>64</sup> For example, Kenneth Baker notes how "American Minimalism looks like a classicizing reaction against the Romantic exuberance and self-celebration of 1950s Abstract Expressionism". (Baker, K. 1988. *Minimalism: Art of Circumstance*. p13). Although there are many problems with Baker's over-simplistic use of certain terms, his discussion is nonetheless relevant. (See, also *Ibid.* pp29-31). The connections between Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism are discussed further by Strickland (Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p24) and Colpitt (Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p1).

counter-cultural movement to some extent<sup>65</sup>, our present concern lies less in historical categorisation than in those characteristics which are specific to the history of Minimalism in particular, since we have already taken the (dubious) decision to isolate it so squarely.

Probably the most important characteristic of all Minimalist art – and if there were one characteristic which could be used as the binding quality for the definition of Minimalism as a movement, it would be this one – is the condition of *objecthood*. Colpitt provides the following definition: “to refer to the work of art as an object...meant that it was a nonrepresentational, concrete, and real thing existing in the world, without illusion or formal prototype”<sup>66</sup>.

Amongst the techniques employed by Minimalist visual artists to achieve this objecthood were the reduction of external and internal relations of the artwork in question. The internal relational elements of art “specify the ordering of pictorial or sculptural parts”<sup>67</sup> within the work itself. In Minimalism, the emphasis on nonrelational internal composition stipulates that “individual parts and elements play a subordinate role to the overall form of the work. It is not that elements are necessarily eliminated, but rather that the idiosyncratic or dynamic relationships between them are expended”<sup>68</sup>. The increased use of symmetry in place of the usual concerns for balance mark much Minimalist painting. Frank Stella’s *Delaware Crossing* (1961), for example, uses a chevron design which, because it is used perfectly symmetrically and pointing inward, serves not to complicate the painting, but to focus the perceiver’s attention onto the centre of the canvas, reinforcing the singularity of the art-object. Similarly, the black monochrome canvases<sup>69</sup> of Ad Reinhardt<sup>70</sup>, which Strickland describes as “the most austere reductivism imaginable”<sup>71</sup>, contain no parts which may relate to each other, demonstrating the monochrome’s ability both to provide a sense of unity as well as to reinforce the objecthood of the minimalist work.

<sup>65</sup> See notes 23-26.

<sup>66</sup> Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p107.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* p41.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* p43.

<sup>69</sup> One could also include the monochromes of painters Frank Stella, Robert Mangold and many others in this nonrelational category.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* p43.

<sup>71</sup> Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p44.

In Minimalist sculpture, Donald Judd explicitly stated that “the parts are unrelational...when you start relating parts...you’re assuming you have a vague whole...and definite parts, which is all screwed up, because you should have a definite whole and maybe no parts, or very few”<sup>72</sup>. What Minimalist sculptors were concerned with, then, was the creation of autonomous, self-contained objects<sup>73</sup>. If there was more than one part, as in Judd’s serial sculptures which often included identical forms repeated in different materials or colours, these remained nonrelational in the sense that their relationship (to each other) is one of duplication, and their differences do not imply a dynamism.

In Minimalist music, similar traits are observable. La Monte Young’s *Trio*, for example, uses a miniature arch-form<sup>74</sup> which is structured so as to allude to minimum differentiation between its parts, using the smallest possible number of notes in that particular setting, thus the strictest symmetry, in musical terms. A similar observation can be made of Steve Reich’s phasing technique (first used by Terry Riley), which involves two (or more) instruments/tape recorders beginning an identical melody in unison and gradually shifting out of phase at specific intervals creating a series of unexpected and (if I may express so personal an opinion) exciting melodic and pulse variations. In the case of Reich’s phasing, the sense of nonrelationalism is reinforced in the active process of the composition – the phasing technique implies the compositions’s self-productive position – where the two (or more) identical fragments evolve so gradually that the relation between the parts, although the temporal displacements involved technically constitute new relationships, appears to be negligible. The composition is experienced as a unitary whole.

The internal concerns of literary Minimalism prove quite different from those espoused in either music or art. According to Hallett, Minimalist writing employs a “blunt, uncomplicated prose...[and] lack of editorial commentary”<sup>75</sup>, which would, indeed, suggest a definite reduction in the internal structural relations from those governing many earlier fictions. She further maintains that Minimalist writers show a “preference for discontinuous devices, arbitrary and

<sup>72</sup> Donald Judd. In Glaser, B. 1966. ‘Questions to Stella and Judd’. In *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. 1968. Edited by G. Battcock. pp153-154.

<sup>73</sup> A view expressed by sculptor Robert Morris. (Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p267).

<sup>74</sup> Strickland provides an account of the form, performance and reception of the *Trio*. *Ibid*. pp119-121.

<sup>75</sup> Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. p13.

open endings, interplay of surface details, narrative omissions, and anti-linear plots”<sup>76</sup>. Yet, there seems to be a certain paradox at work. If it can be maintained that Minimalism can be asserted as the search for minimum, it follows that the nonrelativity of the internal elements of the work are vital for its success in approaching objecthood, in attempting to escape what was earlier called the System of the Subject. Yet Hallett notes in the canonised Minimalists an “interplay of surface details”, which would seem to suggest that, far from Judd’s ideal of few, if any, internal relations, the Minimalist writer seems to thrive on disguised complexity.

In examining Raymond Carver’s short story, *One More Thing*, this interplay is quite evident. The domestic squalor and discord is overtly stated in the words, “she came home from work and found L.D. drunk and being abusive to Rae”<sup>77</sup>, but several suggestive structural patterns later allude to the fact that the seriousness of the situation far exceeds the blandness with which it is presented. The abusive male character, L.D., twice hits the table violently<sup>78</sup> and later, as he leaves, we are told that “he drew himself up and faced them. They moved back”<sup>79</sup>, which would suggest a genuine fear, quite possibly resultant of a progressive pattern of extreme violence which is not directly alluded to in the narrative, aside from a brief mention that “He’s violent. Get out of the kitchen before he hurts you”<sup>80</sup>. These implications are effected by an interplay of internal structural relations and contrived exclusions. Of course, the case could be stated in a much simpler way: Minimalist prose is bound by the conventional principles of narrative, and, although it may subvert some of these, there is no attempt to dispense with narrative altogether. Since narrative is comprised of complex interactive structural elements<sup>81</sup>, for Minimalist writing to be nonrelational in any way which could satisfy the demands stipulated in the visual arts and music, it would have to abandon many of the literary conventions Hallett seems to assert are fundamental to it.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* p16.

<sup>77</sup> Carver, R. 1989. ‘One More Thing’. In *Where I’m Calling From*. p147.

<sup>78</sup> “He hit the table with the flat of his hand. The ashtray jumped. His glass fell on its side and rolled off” (*Ibid.* p148). “He slammed down his hand on the table”. (*Ibid.* p149).

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* p151.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* p148.

<sup>81</sup> Specifically in systems such as Barthes’. (Barthes, R. 1977. ‘Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives’. In *Image, Music, Text*. Translated by S. Heath).

To return to the external relations of the artwork – the ways in which the artwork exists in space and time and in relation to the perceiver – several specific techniques are observable. In music, the medium is particularly problematic, since, of all the media of art, sound is probably the most abstract and consequently most resistant to translation into concrete terms of objecthood. Perhaps the best example to illustrate the tendency of Minimalist music in this regard is found in Alvin Lucier's *I am sitting in a room*:

*I am sitting in a room, different from the one you are in now. I am recording the sound of my speaking voice, and I am going to play it back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm, is destroyed. What you will hear then are the natural resonant frequencies of the room articulated by speech. I regard this activity not so much as the demonstration of a physical fact but more as a way to smooth out any irregularities my speech might have*<sup>82</sup>.

Lucier's composition ranks amongst the best examples of Minimalist tape music. The procedure involves the recording of the text quoted (in full) above, which is then looped and recorded at the same time, with the result that the overlaying of the recorded text eventually ends in white noise – which is precisely what the text claims it will do (and hence is auto-reflexive and auto-productive). The external relational issues in this most extreme form of self-reflexive Minimalism are therefore intimately related to issues of process. As Strickland notes, "in its ambient conversion of speech modules into drone frequencies, it [*I am sitting in a room*] unites the two principal structural components of Minimalist music in general"<sup>83</sup>. In its repetitive modular development, Lucier's composition (and many compositions of Steve Reich, Terry Riley and Philip Glass<sup>84</sup> which employ similar techniques) seeks to present the listener with the simplest constituent elements of music, of sound as an object. As the looped repetitions intensify, so their specific parts dissolve into oneness, and white noise becomes the pure sonic object, ultimately attempting to disengage the listener<sup>85</sup>.

<sup>82</sup> Alvin Lucier. Libretto for *I am sitting in a room*. (*Ibid.* p199).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* p199.

<sup>84</sup> It is worth mentioning the particular advancements in modular repetition which Philip Glass introduced. Glass began to use additive and subtractive modules around 1967. A hypothetical module could consist of the notes C-D-C. In additive modular form, the following sequence could then occur: C-D-C-E, C-D-C-E-C, C-D-C-E-C-F, etc. A subtractive version of the same modular pattern would simply reverse the process. Strickland reports that, "Glass's subsequent pieces [after 1967] were constructed entirely out of this sort of modular repetition, additive/subtractive structure, and figural displacement. His conclusion is a subversion of the entire narrative of western music". (*Ibid.* p213).

<sup>85</sup> Admittedly, there are many other complex issues involved in the external relational aspects of Minimalist music, but for the sake of the present study I have purposefully excluded these. Very important, for example, would be

External relational issues serve, in many respects, as portals to several of the other significant philosophico-aesthetic conditions for objecthood in the visual arts. Colpitt describes these concerns as “a new focus on relationships struck across and within the space between the spectator and the object of perception”<sup>86</sup>.

A chief concern of Minimalist artists was the idea of *presence*, that the art-object is able to convey clearly a sense of its objecthood and a status separate from its environment. Colpitt maintains that “there are no exhibited, formal clues to signal the existence of presence, since it is felt, *responded to*, rather than *recognised*”<sup>87</sup>. Evident in the concept of presence is a contract of sorts which exists between the Minimalist work and the perceiver. However, despite several claims to the contrary, Minimalist presence was never intended to engage some hazy metaphysical sense of Being. As Fried claims<sup>88</sup>, Minimalists “want[...] to achieve presence through objecthood, which requires a certain largeness of scale, rather than through size alone”<sup>89</sup>. What a sense of Minimalist *presence* requires, then, is a certain acknowledgement of the work within the time and space of the perceiver which draws maximum attention to the work. In Minimalist music, although the concerns are somewhat different, presence is conveyed through a sense of immediacy achieved by presenting extremely simple works and by use of sustained drones or repetition. In this way, Minimalist composers are able to reduce the time between the perceiver’s reception of the music and consequent perception, processing and reflection. Because there is little variation in the music – and when there is, it tends to be a gradual evolution – the perceiver is able to experience the composition as being present, existing in the same time as the apparent immediacy of its perception.

Related to this rather vague demand for presence in Minimalist visual arts, are extremely stringent demands concerning the scale of the work. As suggested by Fried, the issue of scale is intimately related to the sense of presence conveyed by the work in question. “Like presence, the

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issues of the space in which the music was performed and the acoustics involved, and related to this, the duration of the composition and the various psycho-acoustic elements involved.

<sup>86</sup> Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p67.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* p70.

<sup>88</sup> He refers here specifically to the work of Morris, but the statement holds true for the majority of Minimalist art.

<sup>89</sup> Fried, M. 1967. ‘Art and Objecthood’. In *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. 1968. Edited by G. Battcock. p126.

ingredients of scale cannot be *prescribed*<sup>90</sup>, but it was generally agreed upon that the appropriate scale for a work, “the relationship of the spectator to the object”<sup>91</sup>, was one that maximised the sense of the presence of the actual object, in other words, which drew attention to the object-status of the work in question. Tony Smith’s response when questioned about the scale of his sculpture, *Die*, perhaps best summarises the indefiniteness and yet insistence of the Minimalist demands in this regard:

*Q: Why didn't you make it larger so that it would loom over the observer?*

*A: I was not making a monument.*

*Q: Then why didn't you make it smaller so that the observer could see over the top?*

*A: I was not making an object*<sup>92</sup>.

Interestingly, Smith claims not to be involved in making objects, and yet, the condition of objecthood is the very pivotal condition of Minimalism. Perhaps what Smith was trying to indicate in this case was a counteraction to Fried’s criticism of the theatricality implicit in the condition of objecthood. According to Fried, theatricality involves “the beholder know[ing] himself...as *subject* to the impassive object on the wall or floor”<sup>93</sup> which results in the claim that the Minimalist object “*depends on* the beholder, is *incomplete* without him”<sup>94</sup>. By asserting that he was not creating an object, it is plausible to suggest that Smith was really counteracting this supposed theatricality Fried was suggesting. Smith’s concern with the appropriate scale for the work in question attempts to elevate the Minimalist object to a status equal<sup>95</sup> – not superior or inferior – to that of the perceiver. If Minimalists were successful in this respect, which I believe they were, it is difficult to comprehend how this theatricality Fried refers to can be achieved.

In Minimalist literature, the question of scale is particularly problematic. Hallett proposes a parallel poetics which exists between Minimalism and the short story, claiming that “both minimalism and the short story privilege the singular, focus on surface images, and speak

<sup>90</sup> Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p77.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* p75.

<sup>92</sup> Tony Smith. In Fried, M. 1967. ‘Art and Objecthood’. In *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. 1968. Edited by G. Battcock. p128.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* p128.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* p140.

<sup>95</sup> It may be argued that this equal status results in the reversion of the Minimalist object to the System of the Subject, since, if it is to exist on the same terms as the perceiver, it is implicitly re-empowered as an active Subject, since it maintains this equality itself, even though it may initially have been dependent on various Minimalist techniques to achieve this status. This paradoxical position will be developed in subsequent argumentation.



sparingly...both have been subjected to the worst sort of literary bias: accused of lacking capacity and substance”<sup>96</sup>. It is precisely in identifying this “worst literary bias”, that Hallett’s investigation, I believe, moves away from minimalism. In fact, much of Hallett’s argument is based on an attempt to reinvest Minimalist literature with some dignity and respect, hence her identification of Minimalism as “concrete details which reflect complex states of being and which correlate with elements of the universal human condition”<sup>97</sup>.

What Hallett proposes is very far from the ontological neutrality which was sought by both Minimalist composers and artists. In terms of scale, it is difficult to marry Hallett’s emphasis on brevity as a means of containing compressed (and hence Minimalist) meaning with concerns of scale in the visual arts or music. While artists emphasise an appropriate scale in order to deduce maximum presence and a sense of nonrelational unity in the art-object, Minimalist writers’ concerns seem to be considerably less rigorous, governed by some vague notion that either a tiny or monumental scale will result in an increased potency of their message and some (rather bizarre) connection to a mysterious “universal human condition”. In other words, while the scale of Minimalist art and music emphasises the objecthood of the work in question, Minimalist literature’s view of scale reinforces its position within the System of the Subject (which again ties in with the fact that Minimalist prose makes no real attempt to escape the representational and illusional [allusional?] shackles of narrative).

In attempting to evoke the optimal presence of the art-object, Minimalists further insisted that their work was totally nonreferential – “released from representation, they further remove themselves from allusion by being in themselves new and unique objects, referring to nothing (except, some might argue, to the theories upon which they are based)”<sup>98</sup>. In sculpture and painting this resulted in an overt rejection of the ideas of traditional abstraction, “art whose forms have a basis in the real world”<sup>99</sup>. Similarly, anthropomorphism (“the appearance of human feelings in things that are inanimate or not human, usually as if those feelings are the essential

<sup>96</sup> Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. pp20-21.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* p47.

<sup>98</sup> Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p102.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.* p101.

nature of the thing described”<sup>100</sup>) was “displaced in this art (Minimalism) by the nonanthropomorphic quality of ‘presence’”<sup>101</sup>. Minimalist art is characterised by a vigorous eschewal of mimesis – this is implied in the professed ‘realness’ of Minimalist objecthood – and the substitution of geometry for the qualities which would normally be considered mimetic<sup>102</sup>. For Minimalists, the shapes of their works were therefore seen as geometric deduction rather than a mimesis of something preexistent.

This essential condition, implied by the dynamic combination of appropriate scale, presence and nonanthropomorphism, resulted in the ideal Minimalist work being entirely nonreferential to anything other than itself. Being nonreferential, the artwork is supposedly liberated within the System of the Object to be a pure object. As Richard Wollheim notes in reference to Minimalist art: “the identity of a work...resides in the actual stuff in which it consists”<sup>103</sup>, or in Fried's summation “the shape [art] is the object”<sup>104</sup>. The Minimalist aesthetic theory of the object implies that the art-object exists as a unitary whole, with a specific and autonomous status. It is thus not surprising to find that Robert Morris referred to his works as *unitary forms* and that Donald Judd described his sculptures as *specific objects*<sup>105</sup>.

Unity and wholeness were achieved in Minimalism by what may be awkwardly described as various surface techniques. In music, for example, the use of repetitive modules<sup>106</sup> drew attention to the fact that the constituent elements of the composition were, in fact, extremely limited and thus could be perceived as unifying the sense of wholeness in the composition. Similar techniques were deployed both in sculpture and painting. Donald Judd produced several serial sculptures, establishing repetition as a viable Minimalist sculptural tool. In painting this trend emerges most clearly in the *hard edge* painting of Ellsworth Kelly, which consists of repeated (usually) vertical bands or panels of highly contrasted colour, to which Judd ascribes “some...earlier purity, idealism, and oblique but directly descriptive reference to nature”<sup>107</sup>.

<sup>100</sup> Donald Judd. In Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p67.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* p70.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* p71.

<sup>103</sup> Wollheim, R. 1965. ‘Minimal Art’. In *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. 1968. Edited by G. Battcock. p391.

<sup>104</sup> Fried, M. 1967. ‘Art and Objecthood’. In *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. 1968. Edited by G. Battcock. p119.

<sup>105</sup> Quoted in Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p110.

<sup>106</sup> See note 84.

<sup>107</sup> Judd, D. 1975. *Complete Writings: 1959-1975*. p130.

Strickland highlights the unifying function of Kelly's repetition, which he associates with the immediacy of the inevitable contrasts of Kelly's panels<sup>108</sup>, and their significance in exploiting the effectiveness of replication within modular patterns of structural uniformity<sup>109</sup>.

Minimalist literature also makes use of repetition, but often to completely different ends. In Joan Didion's novel, *A Book of Common Prayer*<sup>110</sup>, repetition is used frequently to draw the reader's attention to specific phrases. For example, in the fourth chapter, the following modular repetition occurs: "the draining of the artificial lake did not go unremarked upon at the Jockey Club...Elena's resignation did not go unremarked upon at the Jockey Club...The presence...of this conspicuous *nortamericana* was not likely to go unremarked upon at the Jockey Club"<sup>111</sup>. However, this employment of repetition has nothing to do with the objecthood of the text<sup>112</sup>, since Didion's position is so clearly founded in the conventions of narrative. Rather, it is a rhetorical device used to draw attention to the (narrative) fact that "the Jockey Club is less than it seems"<sup>113</sup>, a reflection of the general situation in Boca Grande (the setting of the novel), a place which "defeated the imagination of even its first visitor"<sup>114</sup>.

A more satisfactorily Minimalist use of repetition may be found in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet Steve McCaffery's extended poem *Panopticon*. At the end of the third part the phrase "and

<sup>108</sup> Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p73.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* p70-71.

<sup>110</sup> I should mention that Joan Didion cannot be described as a Minimalist. This proves to be a limitation of her techniques. However there is a certain directness and reduction in her writing which makes it associable with Minimalist aesthetics.

<sup>111</sup> Didion, J. 1979. *A Book of Common Prayer*. p20.

<sup>112</sup> A similar use of repetition is encountered in the novels of Hemingway, whom Hallett identifies as a "stylistic genitor of contemporary minimalist prose" (Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. p37). Consider the following extract from *A Farewell to Arms*:

*then there was a flash, as a blast-furnace door is swung open, and a roar that started white and went red and on and on in a rushing wind. I tried to breathe but my breath would not come and I felt myself rush bodily out of myself and out and out and out and all the time bodily in the wind...The ground was torn up and in front of my head there was a splintered beam of wood. In the jolt of my head I heard somebody crying. I thought somebody was screaming. I tried to move but I could not move.*

(Hemingway, E. 1935. *A Farewell to Arms*. p46). Here, the repetition of certain words dramatically increases the 'reality effect' of his writing, the confusion which surrounds the entire explosion-incident which leaves the protagonist severely injured. Hemingway's use of motivic repetition and elaboration – such as the repetition, intertwining and consequent visual development of the "plain" and "trees" in the opening page of the novel (*Ibid.* p7) – display only a surface resemblance to Minimalist repetition, however, since it is more involved in narrative illusionism than in any process which could lead to the state of objecthood.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* p20.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* p11.

on”<sup>115</sup> is repeated no less than four hundred and forty times! Essentially, McCaffery’s deployment of the phrase, although it originally alludes to the previous content of the poem, becomes a prime example of how language repeated *can* be regarded in terms of Minimalist objecthood. By the time we reach the two hundredth repetition (assuming we chose to read these lines, rather than appreciate them in terms of a purely pictorial aesthetic – in which case language nonetheless still dissolves into a state of objecthood) the contents of the poem are far gone, and what the reader is left with is a self-reflexive literary object. The language does exactly what it says it will do – it goes on and on – and, in so doing, points to itself as an independent object which reinforces itself in the repetition of its autonomy.

Were it not for the nagging drone of Minimalist literary critics, the exercise in amateur cartography would be complete. However, from Hallett’s argument, it would appear that the concept of reduction (the different forms and nature of reduction) is central to Literary Minimalism. Consequently, I shall attempt to discuss, in some detail, the Minimalist use of reduction in the following paragraphs, particularly as it relates to literary discourse.

#### IV.

In the following extended quotation, Hallett identifies nine principal characteristics of Minimalist writing:

*1) a blunt, lean, apparently uncomplicated prose; 2) a compact prose that by individual artistic design effects a complex pattern of trope which expands from what first appear to be trivial matters into universal concerns; 3) more dialogue than exposition with no evident auctorial intrusion, and little, if any narrational intrusion; 4) non-heroic characters who resemble everyday people...; 5) a sense that all ‘action’ either appears to have occurred a while ago, or occurred just moments before the story began, or occurs later...; 6) implications of an existential, often absurd universe in which ‘real’ communication is impossible and action useless...; 7) a recognition that words are useless, for most things are unsayable; 8) a perception that time passes without resistance or that characters exists as an audience rather than as participants...; 9) a universe in which no one thing appears innately important, so all worth is artificially conferred, decided by individual values*<sup>116</sup>.

<sup>115</sup> McCaffery, S. 1994. From ‘Panopticon’. In *From the Other Side of the Century: A New American Poetry 1960-1990*. Edited by D. Messerli. pp1024-1025.

<sup>116</sup> Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. p25.

Although, in this specific quotation, Hallett does not explicitly mention reduction, several of her points imply a connection. In the first, the word “lean” points to a certain largeness which preceded this lean state, and “apparently uncomplicated” suggests a rather vague outward movement, both a prior and future state of complexity. Hallett’s emphasis on the expansion of the “complex pattern of trope” in the second point, together with the subversion of narrative time in points five and eight, suggest that Minimalist literature is intensely concerned with presenting a narrative world devoid of any excess and in which time is reduced to an essential necessity, an assumption rather than a reality.

Elsewhere, Hallett addresses the issue of reduction directly. She maintains that “the minimalist produces a partial version...contained in a space so carefully condensed that one must infer from the part exposed exactly what has been omitted, what lies beneath”<sup>117</sup>, later referring to Minimalist short stories quite bluntly as “containers of condensed meaning”<sup>118</sup>. Implicit in this imagery of condensation are the ideas of simplification and reduction. Yet significantly, Hallett’s model does not stipulate any sort of Minimalist objecthood, the condensed writing from this reduction resulting, instead, in a rarified account of the same mysterious “universal concerns” (waiting to explode forth from this condensed state) that Hallett identifies in the quotation above. In this poetics of “maximal exclusion of extraneous...words”, critics such as Saltzman are able to identify Minimalist writers as “diligent refiner[s] of sentences”<sup>119</sup>.

The issue of reduction is dealt with quite differently in the visual arts. Whereas Minimalist literature tends to view reduction as an imperative, perhaps the primary technique of producing these containers of “universal concerns”, Colpitt specifically states that “while simplicity *implies* an intentionally reductive process...it does not demand it. For many artists there is a difference between the conception of a work of art as simple and the process of reducing from complexity to arrive at that simplicity”<sup>120</sup>. It seems that the keyword to consider in Colpitt’s statement is “implies”, which is further emphasised through its italicisation. Not only does the word open up the possibility of the construction *usually, but not necessarily*, but it further suggests the inherent

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* p9.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.* p11.

<sup>119</sup> Arthur M. Saltzman. In Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. p45.

<sup>120</sup> Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p114.

concerns of the perceiver, addressing the questions: 'who or what implies?'; 'to whom is this implication addressed?'

Essentially, what I wish to suggest is that the extremity of reduction which seems evident in Minimalist art, is as much a projection of the assumptions of the perceiver as it is an active and traceable process. Colpitt proceeds to note "simplification or reduction are conceptual...if elements were to be eliminated, they were done so in the artist's mind"<sup>121</sup>, a consideration necessitated by the condition of objecthood, since the Minimalist art-object requires that it be accepted on its own terms. If the perceiver or critic claims to be able to note an active reduction, then it is because recontextualising the Minimalist work in the conventional discourse of the aesthetic requires an elaboration, an *act* of perception (that is, active perception) or of paying attention, of the kind noted by Merleau-Ponty<sup>122</sup>, which is, in this sense an active (act of) expansion. Thus, it seems that there is a tremendous tension between reduction and expansion, where any overt commentary on reduction actually already implies a reconstructive<sup>123</sup> expansion.

As mentioned, objecthood in art was achieved by numerous methods, but the conception of the art-object as devoid of traditional complexities was sought, in Colpitt's words, "by using materials as they were, without adulteration"<sup>124</sup>. Now, as soon as the possibility of a literary work is placed within the traditional structures of literary discourse – in talking, then, of Minimalist poetry, prose or drama, for example – then it is clear that we are no longer talking of

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* p115.

<sup>122</sup> Attention emerges as an important concept in minimalist aesthetics. Colpitt observes how many Minimalist artists considered the value of art to be synonymous with the interest it elicits from the spectator. She associates Judd's statement that work only needs to be interesting with the Kantian notion of interest as taking pleasure in a thing's existence. (Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p123-125). An interesting parallel emerges in Merleau-Ponty's view of attention. While the Kantian notion of interest can be easily allied with the empiricist notion that attention, that is, the subject's paying of attention to a specific object, occurs as a result of the imminent qualities of the object, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological stance differs considerably. He finds fault in the empiricist and intellectualist notions that "attention creates nothing"(p28), asserting the phenomenological view that it is the very act of perception, although contingent on the preexistence of the world, that is responsible for the construction of reality. On this basis, Merleau-Ponty is able to assert that "to pay attention is not merely further to elucidate pre-existing data, it is to bring about a new articulation of them"(p30). (Merleau-Ponty, M. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*. p27-32). Merleau-Ponty's views seem quite distinct from Colpitt's or Judd's. The presupposition of Colpitt and Judd is that an art object can, of its own accord, command interest or draw attention, whereas Merleau-Ponty seems to suggest that attention is constructive in and of itself.

<sup>123</sup> And it should be noted that these reconstructions are inevitably going to be disputable, since they rely on the referential framework of the 'reconstructor' which will invariably be nonidentical to that of the artist.

<sup>124</sup> Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p114.

material language “as it is, without adulteration”. I recognise, immediately, that the equation is not a simple as this. But what *is* important to emphasise is that regardless of whether or not it is assumed that genre precedes the compression of language into genre, or whether or not these two have an inter-dependent relationship, the resultant system of literary discourse, as such, is always already a complication, an active complication (which is, I think, in some respects, the condition for communication).

This position accounts for Verhoeven’s observation of two apparently opposing forces operating in that literature which has been canonised as Minimalist: “one of the problems with the label ‘minimalism’ is that there has been a tendency among critics and reviewers to use the term rather one-sidedly, that is, with an emphasis on the *aesthetics* of the writing: foregrounding form, style, vocabulary, syntax, imagery, structure, plot, and characterisation, at the expense of content, meaning, effect, and vision”<sup>125</sup>. It is possible to recognise in Verhoeven’s criticism the essential paradox of Minimalist literature, the paradox that is perhaps responsible for the failure (which I shall subsequently attempt to demonstrate) of this literature to approach the concept of *minimum*, and to be defined as *minimalist* (with a lower-case *m*), or prone towards minimum. This paradox may be briefly defined as the implicit problem of a formal, technical reduction of particular genres which are expected somehow to approach minimum while still containing all the elements of content and meaning expected of these genres. There is no doubt that Raymond Carver (the great American literary Minimalist) achieves a remarkable condensation – that was never in dispute – but it is impossible to define his writing in terms of objecthood or minimum. Apart from demonstrating that Carver’s later writing rejects even these surface characteristics of Minimalism<sup>126</sup>, this position may explain why Verhoeven eventually classifies Carver’s writing as “post-postmodern moral realism”<sup>127</sup>.

The fact that Minimalist literature is clearly involved in an active reduction of quite a different order to that of Minimalist art, can be accurately attributed to the differences in the demands of the respective discourses. However, while the Minimalist artists demonstrated a willingness to

<sup>125</sup> Verhoeven, W.M. 1995. ‘What We Talk About When We Talk About Raymond Carver: Or, Much Ado About Minimalism’. In *Narrative Turns and Minor Genres in Postmodernism*. Edited by T. D’haen and H. Bertens. pp43-44.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.* pp47-49.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.* p58.

subvert and even radically alter the expectations of their discourse – which accounts for frequent criticisms of Minimalism as non-art or anti-art<sup>128</sup> – the literary Minimalists seem less keen to abandon the privileges traditionally assigned to literary discourse<sup>129</sup>. It is necessary to acknowledge that they are Minimalists – it is far too late to counteract this label. However, as I shall presently argue, while many of the efforts of Minimalists in the visual arts and music can be considered as yearning for the dynamic movement I have alluded to as minimalism, or the System of the Object, the resistance (whether intentional or emanating from the structure of the discourse) of literary Minimalists leave them somewhat stranded in *the upper-case*, the System of the Subject.

What is this imprisonment in life I alluded to earlier? It seems an all too obvious paradox, but 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 it is 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"<sup>130</sup>. If this is the grand realization of the tragic tragedy – a realization which Critchley might call an active nihilism, one which "tries to grasp and comprehend the phenomenon of nihilism in its naive desire to overcome it"<sup>131</sup> – then it may appear that there is more seriousness to this imprisonment than may first seem evident. It is certainly something profoundly more problematic than the simplistic exit sought by Oedipus.

The problem, in short, is this: I cannot think, speak, or write<sup>132</sup> either my birth or my death. Only two things my being-in-the-world (to borrow from Heidegger), my *Dasein*, makes me aware 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 superfluous, the entirely irrelevant. And yet I must think, speak, write – I am compelled that, for I am trapped in the moment.

<sup>128</sup> See Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: the Critical Perspective*. pp125-132.

<sup>129</sup> I shall expand on these subsequently.



## 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”<sup>1</sup>. 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”<sup>2</sup> – 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 write<sup>3</sup> 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

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

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

<sup>3</sup> 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”<sup>4</sup>.

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”<sup>5</sup>. 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 impossibility<sup>6</sup> – Being can be understood not only as founded *in* language, but as “the taking place of language, to seize the instance of discourse”<sup>7</sup>. I cannot not communicate, to recall Hanson<sup>8</sup>, 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*”<sup>9</sup>, 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”<sup>10</sup>. 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 shifters<sup>11</sup>, 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*”<sup>12</sup>. 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*.

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

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* pp10-13, 15.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p31.

<sup>8</sup> See page 5.

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

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p5.

<sup>11</sup> 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).

<sup>12</sup> *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"<sup>13</sup>, then what we are left with/in is discourse, and moreover, according to Derrida, *written* discourse: "what writing itself...betrays is life"<sup>14</sup>. 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 result<sup>15</sup>.

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"<sup>16</sup>, in Derrida's terms. Agamben proceeds:

<sup>13</sup> Derrida, J. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. p20.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p25.

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

<sup>16</sup> 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, violent<sup>17</sup>.*

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 language<sup>18</sup>.*

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"<sup>19</sup>. 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

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

<sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> 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)"<sup>20</sup>. 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"<sup>21</sup>. 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*<sup>22</sup>, 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"<sup>23</sup>. 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

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

<sup>21</sup> Derrida, J. 1998. *Monolingualism of the Other, Or the Prosthesis of Origin*. p69.

<sup>22</sup> See West, D. 1996. *An Introduction to Continental Philosophy*. P182.

<sup>23</sup> 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”<sup>24</sup>. Vattimo defines nihilism through the project opened up by the Nietzschean “death of God, or by the ‘devaluation of the highest values’”<sup>25</sup> and Heideggerian Being through non-Being mentioned above<sup>26</sup>. Essentially the proposition amounts to a realisation that the ideals proposed, perhaps even imposed, by the

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

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p20.

<sup>26</sup> *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"<sup>27</sup>. 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"<sup>28</sup> (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 claims<sup>29</sup> 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 finitude<sup>30</sup>.

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"<sup>31</sup>. Yet, Adorno maintains that nihilism is opposite to the identification with Nothing<sup>32</sup>, 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.

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

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p25.

<sup>29</sup> And it is a claim that I support wholeheartedly.

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

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p20.

<sup>32</sup> *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”<sup>33</sup>. 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 accomplished<sup>34</sup>. 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 visible<sup>35</sup>.*

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”<sup>36</sup> – to recall the earlier argument, the mute Voice of Being is always already thrown in language.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p14-15.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* p13.

<sup>35</sup> *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).

<sup>36</sup> 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”<sup>37</sup>. The response which nihilism calls us to, therefore, is “*meaningless as an achievement*”<sup>38</sup>. 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*<sup>39</sup>.

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”<sup>40</sup>, and yet we are always left with “the atmosphere”<sup>41</sup> of presence, which can, to be sure, appear later as a content”<sup>42</sup>.

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

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* p27.

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

<sup>40</sup> 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*"<sup>43</sup>. 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]<sup>44</sup> is beyond contradiction; it embraces and dominates its contradictory. In this sense being has no outlets<sup>45</sup>.*

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"<sup>46</sup>. According to Critchley, Levinas regards the *il y a* as the "moment of literature"<sup>47</sup>. 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"<sup>48</sup>. This *nothing* which is the place of

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"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.

<sup>41</sup> 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.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*. p35.

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

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

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

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*. p31.

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

<sup>48</sup> 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”<sup>49</sup> – 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”<sup>50</sup>. 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*<sup>51</sup>.

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?

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* p5.

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

<sup>51</sup> 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 internal<sup>52</sup> and external<sup>53</sup> nonrelational parts, beyond the calls for holism<sup>54</sup>, unity and nonreferentiality<sup>55</sup>, and beyond the *presence*<sup>56</sup> 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 all<sup>57</sup>.

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"<sup>58</sup>. 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"<sup>59</sup>. 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.

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<sup>52</sup> See pp18-20.

<sup>53</sup> See pp20-22.

<sup>54</sup> See pp25-27.

<sup>55</sup> See pp24-25.

<sup>56</sup> See pp22-24.

<sup>57</sup> 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).

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

<sup>59</sup> 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 earlier<sup>60</sup>, 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 signifier<sup>61</sup>. 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

<sup>60</sup> See page 2.

<sup>61</sup> 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*”<sup>62</sup>. 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”<sup>63</sup>. In Merleau-Ponty’s own words, “no language ever wholly frees itself from the precariousness of mute forms of expression”<sup>64</sup>. 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*

<sup>62</sup> Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p126.

<sup>63</sup> Kearney, R. 1994. *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*. p80.

<sup>64</sup> 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*<sup>65</sup>.

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'"<sup>66</sup>.

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"<sup>67</sup>, 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"<sup>68</sup>. 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

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* p75.

<sup>66</sup> Kearney, R. 1994. *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*. pp80-81.

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

<sup>68</sup> 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 minimalism<sup>69</sup> 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”<sup>70</sup>, 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

<sup>69</sup> 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.

<sup>70</sup> 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"<sup>71</sup> 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"<sup>72</sup>. 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*<sup>73</sup>.

<sup>71</sup> Hilfer, T. 1992. *American Fiction Since 1940*. p182.

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

<sup>73</sup> *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"<sup>74</sup>, 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"<sup>75</sup>, 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:

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

<sup>75</sup> *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 said<sup>76</sup>.

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

<sup>76</sup> 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 nihilism<sup>77</sup> 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

<sup>77</sup> 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*<sup>78</sup>.

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 Expressionism<sup>79</sup>. 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”<sup>80</sup>. 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?*<sup>81</sup>.

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:

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

<sup>79</sup> Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p43-45.

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

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* p197.



the nothingness now”<sup>82</sup>. 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”<sup>83</sup>.

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”<sup>84</sup>. 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)<sup>85</sup>. 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”<sup>86</sup>.

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

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* p198.

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

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

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* p204.

<sup>86</sup> *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 "working 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"<sup>87</sup>. By equivocity, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy mean "a basic indetermination, or absence of determination"<sup>88</sup>, what they term an "ab-solution"<sup>89</sup>, 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"<sup>90</sup> 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 dying, 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, literature

<sup>87</sup> 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.

<sup>88</sup> 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.

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

<sup>90</sup> 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”<sup>91</sup>. Critchley explains that “this weakening [of the subject] in the epistemological domain is paralleled by a strengthening of the subject in the ethical domain”<sup>92</sup>. 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”<sup>93</sup>, 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 work<sup>94</sup>, 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 reality<sup>95</sup> – 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

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* p203.

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

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* p89.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* p97.

<sup>95</sup> 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"<sup>96</sup>. The romantic view derives, in part, from Kant's<sup>97</sup> 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"<sup>98</sup>. 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 project<sup>99</sup>.

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'"<sup>100</sup>. 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

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

<sup>97</sup> 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).

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* p86.

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

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

constituted simultaneously as "literature as productivity and literature as reflection"<sup>101</sup>. 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 ethics<sup>102</sup>.*

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 Being<sup>103</sup>. 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 terrifying<sup>104</sup>.*

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.

<sup>101</sup> 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.

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

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

<sup>104</sup> 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"<sup>105</sup>, 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"<sup>106</sup>. Suspension; equivocality – these are the conditions which, in the words of Niall Lucy, result in the "presentation of the unrepresentability of the unrepresentable"<sup>107</sup>: 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 equivocality. Although this position may never be reached in the usual sense, it must, by definition, be reached for. And it must be reached for

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

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* p56.

<sup>107</sup> 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"<sup>108</sup>. 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

<sup>108</sup> 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”<sup>109</sup>.

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”<sup>110</sup> orientation of minimalists towards artworks which draw attention to their material existence, that “art resides in the actual stuff in which it consists”<sup>111</sup>. 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”<sup>112</sup>. 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-work<sup>113</sup> as the absolute subject, the Subject *par excellence*. What is significant to note in

<sup>109</sup> Von Bartelanffy, L. 1968. *General Systems Theory*. pp84-85.

<sup>110</sup> Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p112.

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

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

<sup>113</sup> 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”<sup>114</sup>. 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-minimalist<sup>115</sup>, 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”<sup>115</sup> – what Critchley defines as “the experience of language unworking itself in an irreducible ambiguity that points towards...a dizzying absence, the space

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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.

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

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

of dying itself”<sup>116</sup>. 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-minimalist<sup>117</sup>, says of the new literature he inaugurated<sup>118</sup> 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”<sup>119</sup>. 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”<sup>120</sup>. 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*”<sup>121</sup>. 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*

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

<sup>117</sup> Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p106.

<sup>118</sup> 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.

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

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.* p53.

<sup>121</sup> *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*<sup>122</sup>.

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 criticises<sup>123</sup>. Even Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that “elementary perception is already charged with a *meaning*”<sup>124</sup> 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-discourse<sup>125</sup>. 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.

<sup>122</sup> Derrida, J. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. pp14-15.

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

<sup>124</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*. p4.

<sup>125</sup> 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 project<sup>126</sup>, "individuality is above all that of the multiplicity inherent to the genre...totality is the fragment itself in its completed individuality"<sup>127</sup>. According to Blanchot, the paradoxical structure of romanticism proposes "the necessity of contradiction...romanticism does no more than confirm its vocation of disorder"<sup>128</sup>. 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 power<sup>129</sup>.*

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 equivocality means that the likelihood of similarity is reduced to nil. And, in the self-affirmation of romantic equivocality, 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 sublime<sup>130</sup>. 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:

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

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

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

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.* pp353-354.

<sup>130</sup> 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*<sup>131</sup>.

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*<sup>132</sup>.

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'"<sup>133</sup>, proceeding to identify "the central question in Stella's black paintings [as] the evasion of relations"<sup>134</sup>. 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"<sup>135</sup>.

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

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

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

<sup>133</sup> Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p139.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*. p101.

<sup>135</sup> 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"<sup>136</sup>. 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 quotation<sup>137</sup>. 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 –

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

<sup>137</sup> See page 60 and note 106.

that space in which both romanticism and minimalism are “approachable only in the ‘in-between’<sup>138</sup>, 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 form<sup>139</sup>. 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”<sup>140</sup>. 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

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

<sup>139</sup> See page 61 and note 106.

<sup>140</sup> Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p39.

‘beyond’ within itself”<sup>141</sup>, 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”<sup>142</sup>. 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”<sup>143</sup>, 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”<sup>144</sup>. 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”<sup>145</sup>. 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

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

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.* p48.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.* p105.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.* p105.

<sup>145</sup> 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”<sup>146</sup>. 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

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<sup>146</sup> *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.

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## 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.

<sup>107</sup> See pages 31-32.

<sup>108</sup> Blanchot, M. 1993, 'The Athlete', in *The Infinite Conversation*, Translated by B. Brewster, p. 117.

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-semiotics<sup>147</sup>, 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 discourse<sup>148</sup>, 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*”<sup>149</sup>.

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

<sup>147</sup> 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.

<sup>148</sup> See pages 51-52.

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

assertion that all media are “extension[s] of ourselves”<sup>150</sup>. 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’”<sup>151</sup>. 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”<sup>152</sup>.

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 perception<sup>153</sup>. 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”<sup>154</sup>.

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”<sup>155</sup>, which is “the source from which a radical and threatening negativity emerges”<sup>156</sup>. There is a certain irony in the fact that progress is often gauged in terms of

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

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.* p111.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.* p101.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.* p101.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.* p100.

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

<sup>156</sup> *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 view<sup>157</sup>.*

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.

<sup>157</sup> 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 equivocity 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, paradigm<sup>158</sup> 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 discourse<sup>159</sup>, 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.

<sup>158</sup> 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).

<sup>159</sup> 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'<sup>160</sup>. 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

<sup>160</sup> 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 equivocity. 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”<sup>161</sup>.

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*”<sup>162</sup>, 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

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

<sup>162</sup> 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”<sup>163</sup>, which are “circumscribed by the existence of [these] ‘strong interactions’...or interactions which are ‘nontrivial’”<sup>164</sup>. 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”<sup>165</sup>, 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 syntagmatic<sup>166</sup>, which occurs at every stage of writing. The sentence can be understood in these structuralist terms as containing both synchronic and diachronic systems<sup>167</sup>.

<sup>163</sup> Von Bertalanffy, L. 1968, *General Systems Theory*. p33.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.* p19.

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

<sup>166</sup> Kearney, R. 1994. *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*. pp247-248.

<sup>167</sup> *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*<sup>168</sup>.

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 laws<sup>169</sup>. 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"<sup>170</sup>.

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]"<sup>171</sup>. 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.

<sup>168</sup> Barthes, R. 1974. *S/Z*. p160.

<sup>169</sup> 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.

<sup>170</sup> Von Bartelanffy, L. 1968. *General Systems Theory*. p37.

<sup>171</sup> *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”<sup>172</sup>.

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 order<sup>174</sup>.

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”<sup>175</sup>. 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”<sup>176</sup>. As a result of the homological identification of the romantic

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.* p41.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.* p144.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.* p144.

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

<sup>176</sup> 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”<sup>177</sup> and from which “no material enters or leaves”<sup>178</sup>.

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 chaos<sup>179</sup>. 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”<sup>180</sup>. White adds that “the increasing disorderliness...is really a generative chaos which makes new structures possible”<sup>181</sup>.

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

<sup>177</sup> Von Bartelanffy, L. 1968. *General Systems Theory*. p39.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.* p121.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.* p125.

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

<sup>181</sup> *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 night<sup>182</sup>*

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"<sup>183</sup>. 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"<sup>184</sup>.

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

<sup>182</sup> Blanchot, M. 1981. 'The Gaze of Orpheus'. In *The Gaze of Orpheus*. p99.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.* p102.

<sup>184</sup> *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"<sup>1</sup>. But, although many Minimalists undoubtedly rework the conventional structures of literary discourse, employing often radically reducing techniques of compression<sup>2</sup>, 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.

<sup>1</sup> Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison* p135.

<sup>2</sup> See pages 27-29, 45-46.

## PART THREE MINIMALISM AND GENRE

### BEYOND GENRE

#### I.

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<sup>1</sup> Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. p135.

<sup>2</sup> See pages 27-29, 45-46.

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

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

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

<sup>3</sup> See pages 40-42.

<sup>4</sup> See pages 6, 33.

<sup>5</sup> See pages 33-37.

<sup>6</sup> See pages 41-42.

<sup>7</sup> See pages 41-42.

<sup>8</sup> See page 33.

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

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

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

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

<sup>9</sup> See pages 53-54.

<sup>10</sup> Robbe-Grillet, A. 1955 and 1963. ‘From Realism To Reality’. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots and Towards A New Novel*. Translated by B. Wright. p156.

<sup>11</sup> Robbe-Grillet’s relationship to minimalism and minimalist objecthood will be explored in greater detail below.

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

## II.

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

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

<sup>12</sup> See pages 69-72.

<sup>13</sup> Derrida, J. 1992. 'The Law of Genre'. In *Acts of Literature*. Edited by D. Attridge. p252.

<sup>14</sup> And, in this list, we also see Derrida's own consciousness of his dependence on genre, for is "taxonomic classification" (*Ibid.* p252) not one of order's principles, and so deconstruction is also always generic reconstruction, in a sense.

<sup>15</sup> See page 6.

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

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

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

<sup>16</sup> Lyotard, J-F. 1989. ‘The Sublime and the Avant-Garde’. In *The Lyotard Reader*. Edited by A. Benjamin. p197.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p196.

<sup>18</sup> See Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. p86.

<sup>19</sup> Lyotard, J-F. 1989. ‘The Sublime and the Avant-Garde’. In *The Lyotard Reader*. Edited by A. Benjamin. p197.

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

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

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

<sup>20</sup> Blanchot, M. 1981. 'The Gaze of Orpheus'. In *The Gaze of Orpheus*. Translated by L. Davis. p99.

<sup>21</sup> Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p92.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p86.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p86.

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>24</sup> See pages 35-36.

<sup>25</sup> Todorov, T. 1977. *The Poetics of Prose*. Translated by R. Howard. pp19-20.

<sup>26</sup> Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p58.

<sup>27</sup> Wellek, R. & Warren, A. 1963. *Theory of Literature*. pp227-228.



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

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

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

<sup>28</sup> Barthes, R. 1977. ‘The Death of the Author’. In *Image, Music, Text*. Translated by S. Heath. p145.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p145.

<sup>30</sup> Wellek, R. & Warren, A. 1963. *Theory of Literature*. p226.

### III.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>32</sup> Plato. 1955. *The Republic*. 393c. Translated by D. Lee. p151.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 396c-e. p155.

<sup>34</sup> Derrida, J. 1992. 'The First Session'. In *Acts of Literature*. Translated by D. Attridge. Note 3c. p134.

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>35</sup> Aristotle. 1998. *Poetics*. Translated by K. McLeish. p3.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p6.

<sup>37</sup> Lucy, N. 1997. *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction*. p65.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* p65.

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

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

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

<sup>39</sup> ‘Athenaeum fragment 339’. In Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. p81.

<sup>40</sup> Aristotle. 1998. *Poetics*. Translated by K. McLeish. p6.

<sup>41</sup> Aristotle. 1998. *Poetics*. Translated by K. McLeish. p6.

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

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

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

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

<sup>42</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. p83.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p83.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* p84.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* p85.

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

#### IV.

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

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

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* p87.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* p87.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* p88.

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

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

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

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<sup>49</sup> Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p16.



## MINIMALISM AND PROSE: ALAIN ROBBE-GRILLET

### I.

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>50</sup> Functions proper include cardinal functions, occupying pivotal places in terms of plot development, and catalysers, which include the various units of information between cardinal functions, creating a specific atmosphere in a narrative. Barthes, R. 1977. 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives'. In *Image, Music, Text*. pp92-94.

<sup>51</sup> Indices include indices proper – implicit information completed on higher narrative levels – and informants, which bring specific ready-made and unambiguous information into the narrative. *Ibid.* pp94-96.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* pp96-97.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* p101.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* pp101-102.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* p105.

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

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

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

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

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* p105-106.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* p107.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* p107.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* p115.

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

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

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

<sup>60</sup> Wellek, R. & Warren, A. 1963. *Theory of Literature*. p223.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* pp223-224.

size and status as the other characters”<sup>62</sup>. The seeing subject can, however, only ever be conceived of as a subject, as the nomenclature suggests.

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

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

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* p224.

<sup>63</sup> Fraser, G.S. 1964. *The Modern Writer and His World*. p21.

<sup>64</sup> Russell, B. In Rosenbaum, S.P. 1998. *Aspects of Bloomsbury*. p5.

<sup>65</sup> Rosenbaum, S.P. 1998. *Aspects of Bloomsbury*. p4.

*Phenomenology of Perception*, in which sensation is considered the basic unit of perception<sup>66</sup>).

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

## II.

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

<sup>66</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*. pp3-12.

<sup>67</sup> Bergonzi, B. 1972. *The Situation of the Novel*. p25.

<sup>68</sup> Le Sage, L. 1962. *The French New Novel: An Introduction and A Sampler*. p5.

<sup>69</sup> Bergonzi, B. 1972. *The Situation of the Novel*. p25.

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

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

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

<sup>70</sup> Robbe-Grillet, A. 1957. 'On Some Outdated Notions'. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots and Towards A New Novel*. p58.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* p60.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* p59.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* p63.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* p64.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* p65.

distinction between form and content no longer holds true: “a work of art, like the world, is a living form: it *is*, it needs no justification”<sup>76</sup>.

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

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

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* p72.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* p73.

<sup>78</sup> Robbe-Grillet, A. 1955 and 1963. ‘From Realism To Reality’. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots and Towards A New Novel*. p156.

<sup>79</sup> Robbe-Grillet, A. 1956. ‘A Path for the Future Novel’. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots and Towards A New Novel*. p52.



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

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

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

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* p53.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* pp54-56.

## III.

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

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

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

<sup>82</sup> Robbe-Grillet, A. 1957. 'On Some Outdated Notions'. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots and Towards A New Novel*. pp68-69.

<sup>83</sup> Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. 'In the Corridors of the Underground'. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots and Towards A New Novel*. p27.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* p30.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* pp27, 30.

<sup>86</sup> Agamben, G. 1982. *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*. p43.

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

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

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

<sup>87</sup> Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. ‘In the Corridors of the Underground’. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots and Towards A New Novel*. p33.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* p28.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* p34.

<sup>90</sup> Hallett, C.W. 1999. *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. p25.

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

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

<sup>91</sup> Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. ‘In the Corridors of the Underground’. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots and Towards A New Novel*. p27.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* p27.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* pp28-30.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* pp29-30.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* p31.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* p33.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* p34.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* p34.

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

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

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

<sup>99</sup> Cela, C.G. 2000. 'Hearing in Robbe-Grillet'. In *Poetics Today*. Volume 21, Number 2. Summer 2000. Translated by D. Pessah. p453.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* p453.

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

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

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

<sup>101</sup> See Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p97.

<sup>102</sup> Stolzfuß, B. 1989. ‘Towards Bliss: Barthes, Lacan and Robbe-Grillet’. In *Modern Fiction Studies*. Volume 35, Number 4. Winter 1989. p700.

<sup>103</sup> Lucy, N. 1997. *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction*. p23.

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

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

<sup>104</sup> Stolfus, B. 1989. 'Towards Bliss: Barthes, Lacan and Robbe-Grillet'. In *Modern Fiction Studies*. Volume 35, Number 4. Winter 1989. p703.

<sup>104</sup> Stolfus, B. 1989. 'Towards Bliss: Barthes, Lacan and Robbe-Grillet'. In *Modern Fiction Studies*. Volume 35, Number 4. Winter 1989. p704.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.* p704.

<sup>106</sup> Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. 'In the Corridors of the Underground'. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots and Towards A New Novel*. p28.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.* p32.

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

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

<sup>108</sup> Stolfus, B. 1989. ‘Towards Bliss: Barthes, Lacan and Robbe-Grillet’. In *Modern Fiction Studies*. Volume 35, Number 4. Winter 1989. p703.

<sup>109</sup> Leach, D. 1983. ‘Parallel Methods in Writing and Visual Arts’. In *Generative Literature and Generative Art: New Essays*. Edited by D. Leach. p11.

<sup>110</sup> Morrissette, B. 1983. ‘Generative Techniques in Robbe-Grillet and Ricardou’. In *Generative Literature and Generative Art: New Essays*. Edited by D. Leach. p27.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* p31.

<sup>112</sup> Racevskis, K. 1983. ‘The Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real: Nexus for the Authorial Subject’. In *Generative Literature and Generative Art: New Essays*. Edited by D. Leach. p35.



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

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

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

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* p37.

<sup>115</sup> Robbe-Grillet, A. 1956. 'A Path for the Future Novel'. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots and Towards A New Novel*. p53.

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

<sup>117</sup> Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. 'In the Corridors of the Underground'. In Robbe-Grillet, A. 1965. *Snapshots and Towards A New Novel*. pp27, 30.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.* p27.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.* p31.

to a halt”<sup>120</sup> and when these people attempt to board the train, “they remain more or less stationary”<sup>121</sup>.

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

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

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.* p33.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* p34.

<sup>122</sup> Morrissette, B. 1983. ‘Generative Techniques in Robbe-Grillet and Ricardou’. In *Generative Literature and Generative Art: New Essays*. Edited by D. Leach. pp30-31.

<sup>123</sup> Racevskis, K. 1983. ‘The Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real: Nexus for the Authorial Subject’. In *Generative Literature and Generative Art: New Essays*. Edited by D. Leach. p36.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.* p37.

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

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

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## MINIMALISM AND DRAMA: SAMUEL BECKETT

### I.

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

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<sup>125</sup> See page 74.

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

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

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

<sup>126</sup> Aristotle. 1998. *Poetics*. Translated by K. McLeish. p7.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.* p6.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.* pp6-11.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## II.

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

<sup>129</sup> See, for example, the assertions of Blanchot and Derrida in relation to this point, discussed on pages 34-37.

<sup>130</sup> Levinas, E. 1989. 'There is: Existence without Existents'. In *The Levinas Reader*. Edited by S. Hand. p25.

<sup>131</sup> Fraser, G.S. 1964. *The Modern Writer and His World*. p63.

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

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

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

<sup>132</sup> Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p143.

<sup>133</sup> Beckett, S. 1990. 'Waiting for Godot'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. p87.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.* p87.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.* p88.

<sup>136</sup> Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p25.



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

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

HAMM: *I'll give you nothing more to eat.*

CLOV: *Then we'll die.*

HAMM: *I'll give you just enough to keep you from dying. You'll be hungry all the time.*

CLOV: *Then we shan't die*<sup>138</sup>.

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

<sup>137</sup> Beckett, S. 1990. ‘Endgame’. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. p93.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.* pp94-95.

<sup>139</sup> Connor, S. 1988. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Text and Theory*. p125.

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

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

HAMM: *If you must me, hit me with the axe...Or with the gaff. Hit me with the gaff. Not with the dog. With the gaff. Or with the axe...*

CLOV: *...Let’s stop playing!*

HAMM: *Never!...Put me in my coffin.*

CLOV: *There are no more coffins.*

HAMM: *Then let it end...*<sup>143</sup>

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

<sup>140</sup> Beckett, S. 1990. ‘Endgame’. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. pp133-134.

<sup>141</sup> See pages 33-35.

<sup>142</sup> Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p167.

<sup>143</sup> Beckett, S. 1990. ‘Endgame’. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. p130.

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

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

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

<sup>144</sup> Smith, R.C. 1983. 'Naming the M/inotaur: Beckett's Trilogy and the Failure of Narrative'. In *Modern Fiction Studies*. Volume 29, Number 1. Spring 1983. p77.

<sup>145</sup> Beckett, S. 1990. 'Endgame'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. p134.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.* pp98, 107.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.* pp98, 107.

<sup>148</sup> Nussbaum, M. 1990. 'Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love'. In *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. p289.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.* p289.

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

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

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

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.* p287.

<sup>151</sup> Remembering that even such a critique of propositional language is, unfortunately, always also structured as a proposition – and this is, again, the often bitter irony of existing in the System of the Subject.

<sup>152</sup> Nussbaum, M. 1990. ‘Narrative Emotions: Beckett’s Genealogy of Love’. In *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. p290.

<sup>153</sup> Smith, R.C. 1983. ‘Naming the M/inotaur: Beckett’s Trilogy and the Failure of Narrative’. In *Modern Fiction Studies*. Volume 29, Number 1. Spring 1983. p76.

<sup>154</sup> Nussbaum, M. 1990. ‘Narrative Emotions: Beckett’s Genealogy of Love’. In *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. p297.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.* p293.

<sup>156</sup> Alvarez, A. 1973. *Beckett*. p90.

NAGG: *Were you asleep?*

NELL: *Oh no!*

NAGG: *Kiss me.*

NELL: *We can't.*

NAGG: *Try...*

NELL: *Why this farce day after day?*<sup>157</sup>.

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

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

<sup>157</sup> Beckett, S. 1990. 'Endgame'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. p99.

<sup>158</sup> Hassan, I. 1995. 'Joyce, Beckett, and the Postmodern Imagination'. In *Rumors of Change: Essays of Five Decades*. p103.

<sup>159</sup> Connor, S. 1988. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Text and Theory*. p124.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.* p106.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.* p105.

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

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

<sup>162</sup> Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p152.

<sup>163</sup> See pages 105-106 and notes 50 and 51 of the present part.

<sup>164</sup> Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p160.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.* p161.

<sup>166</sup> Connor, S. 1988. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Text and Theory*. p120.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.* p180.

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

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

### III.

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

<sup>168</sup> Beckett, S. 1990. 'Endgame'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. p104.

<sup>169</sup> Blanchot, M. 1981. 'The Gaze of Orpheus'. In *The Gaze of Orpheus*. Translated by L. Davis. p104.

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

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

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

<sup>170</sup> Connor, S. 1988. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Text and Theory*. p3.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.* p5.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.* p5.



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

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

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

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.* p7.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.* p14.

<sup>175</sup> Martin Esslin associates Beckett’s demonstration of repetition and infinity with Nietzsche’s *eternal recurrence* in the following statement: “there is infinity as the circle that runs into itself and thus can have no end. This circular concept of infinity...merges into Nietzsche’s idea of the endless cycle of recurrence, based on the assumption that, if there is a finite amount of matter in the universe and infinite time, the same combinations and permutations of the same elements must endlessly recur”. (Esslin, M. 1986. ‘Samuel Beckett – Infinity, Eternity’. In *Beckett at 80/Beckett in Context*. Edited by E. Brater. p114).

<sup>176</sup> Connor, S. 1988. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Text and Theory*. p7.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.* pp9-10.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.* p10.

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

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

<sup>179</sup> See pages 21, 25-27.

<sup>180</sup> Strickland, E. 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*. p106.

<sup>181</sup> Colpitt, F. 1990. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. p126.

<sup>182</sup> See page 21, and note 84 of part one.

<sup>183</sup> Connor, S. 1988. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Text and Theory*. p121.

<sup>184</sup> Beckett, S. 1990. 'Endgame'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. p94.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.* p110.

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

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

HAMM: *What time is it?*

CLOV: *The same as usual.*

HAMM: *...Have you looked?*

CLOV: *Yes.*

HAMM: *Well?*

CLOV: *Zero*<sup>191</sup>;

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.* pp95, 97, 104, 127.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.* p127.

<sup>188</sup> Connor, S. 1988. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Text and Theory*. p173.

<sup>189</sup> Hassan, I. 1995. ‘Joyce, Beckett, and the Postmodern Imagination’. In *Rumors of Change: Essays of Five Decades*. p104.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.* p104.

<sup>191</sup> Beckett, S. 1990. ‘Endgame’. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. p94.

CLOV: *Let's see...*[He looks, moving the telescope.] *Zero...*[he looks]...*zero...*[he looks]...*and zero.*

HAMM: *Nothing stirs. All is –*

CLOV: *Zer –*<sup>192</sup>.

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

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

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.* p106.

<sup>193</sup> Esslin, M. 1986. ‘Samuel Beckett – Infinity, Eternity’. In *Beckett at 80/Beckett in Context*. Edited by E. Brater. p117.

<sup>194</sup> Connor, S. 1988. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Text and Theory*. p123.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.* pp123-124.

<sup>196</sup> Beckett, S. 1990. ‘Endgame’. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. p93.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.* p133.

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

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

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

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

<sup>198</sup> Brater, E. 1987. *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's Later Style in the Theatre*. p4.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.* pp61-63.

<sup>200</sup> Beckett, S. 1990. 'Footfalls'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. p403.

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

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

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

<sup>201</sup> See Brater, E. 1987. *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's Later Style in the Theatre*. pp4, 23.

<sup>202</sup> Beckett, S. 1990. 'Not I'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. pp377, 379, 381, 382.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.* p375.

<sup>204</sup> Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p174.

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

#### IV.

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

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

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

<sup>205</sup> Critchley undertakes an excellent discussion of this topic. (*Ibid.* pp165-171).

<sup>206</sup> Hassan, I. 1995. 'Joyce, Beckett, and the Postmodern Imagination'. In *Rumors of Change: Essays of Five Decades*. p117.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.* p114.

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

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

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

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

### I.

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

<sup>208</sup> Beckett, S. 1990. 'Endgame'. In *The Complete Dramatic Works*. p110.

<sup>209</sup> Critchley, S. 1997. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. p151.

<sup>210</sup> Aristotle. 1998. *Poetics*. Translated by K. McLeish. p6.



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

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

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

<sup>211</sup> Derrida, J. 1992. ‘The Law of Genre’. In *Acts of Literature*. Translated by D. Attridge. p252.

<sup>212</sup> Levinas, E. 1989. ‘There is: Existence without Existents’. In *The Levinas Reader*. Edited by S. Hand. p31.

<sup>213</sup> See pages 74-76. *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, p34.

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

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

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

<sup>214</sup> Connor, S. 1988. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text*. pp4-5.

<sup>215</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. p83.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.* p83.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.* p83.

<sup>218</sup> Derrida, J. 1992. 'The Law of Genre'. In *Acts of Literature*. Translated by D. Attridge. p229.

<sup>219</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. p28.

<sup>220</sup> Agamben, G. 1991. *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*. p74.

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.* p40.

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

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

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

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

things category/ French phenomena/ billow reader/ Egyptian echo-chamber/ aaaaaa  
 aaaaaaaaaaaaaa eeeeeeeeee iiiiii iiiiii pppppppp uuuuuuuuuuuu/ helium absent/ volition  
 stychomythic/ relent adoration/ menace tribunes<sup>226</sup>.

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

<sup>224</sup> Watten, B. 1999. ‘The Secret History of the Equal Sign:  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$  between Discourse and Text’. In *Poetics Today*. Volume 20, Number 4. Winter 1999. p597.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.* p597.

<sup>226</sup> Extract from *Legend* section 15 (Bernstein, DiPalma, Andrews). In Watten, B. 1999. ‘The Secret History of the Equal Sign:  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$  between Discourse and Text’. In *Poetics Today*. Volume 20, Number 4. Winter 1999. p610.

<sup>227</sup> Hassan, I. 1995. ‘Joyce, Beckett, and the Postmodern Imagination’. In *Rumors of Change: Essays of Five Decades*. p112.

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

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

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

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.* p103.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.* p106.

<sup>230</sup> See page 6 and note 14 of part one.

<sup>231</sup> Lavender, W. 1996. ‘Disappearance of Theory, Appearance of Praxis: Ron Silliman, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, and the Essay’. In *Poetics Today*. Volume 17, Number 2. Summer 1996. p195.

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

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

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

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

<sup>232</sup> Watten, B. 1999. ‘The Secret History of the Equal Sign:  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$  between Discourse and Text’. In *Poetics Today*. Volume 20, Number 4. Winter 1999. p597.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.* p605.

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

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

## II.

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

<sup>234</sup> Blanchot, M. 1981. 'The Gaze of Orpheus'. In *The Gaze of Orpheus*. Translated by L. Davis. p99.

which Lavender identifies as one of the chief manifestos of the *LANGUAGE* poets<sup>235</sup>, we encounter the principal assertion of *LANGUAGE* poetry in the following prescriptions:

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

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

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

<sup>235</sup> Lavender, W. 1996. 'Disappearance of Theory, Appearance of Praxis: Ron Silliman, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, and the Essay'. In *Poetics Today*. Volume 17, Number 2. Summer 1996. p188.

<sup>236</sup> Silliman, R. 1977. 'Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World'. In *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. 1984. Edited by B. Andrews & C. Bernstein. p131.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.* p122.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.* p122.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.* p125.



referentiality”<sup>240</sup>. In prescribing a poetics which re-centres language, Silliman’s poetics emerges as a Utopian vision of a non-representational ethical poetry which surpasses the negative social implications of capitalism and reemerges as a pure “gestural poetry”<sup>241</sup>.

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

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

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.* p125.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.* p126.

<sup>242</sup> Bernstein, C. 1983. ‘The Stadium of Explanation’. In *Code of Signals: Recent Writings in Poetics*. Edited by M. Palmer. pp292-293.

<sup>243</sup> Lavender, W. 1996. ‘Disappearance of Theory, Appearance of Praxis: Ron Silliman, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, and the Essay’. In *Poetics Today*. Volume 17, Number 2. Summer 1996. p199.

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.* p185.

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

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.* p586.

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

### III.

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

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

<sup>249</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J-L. 1988. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. p105.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.* p105.

<sup>251</sup> Connor, S. 1989. *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*. p121.

<sup>252</sup> Silliman, R. 1977. 'Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World'. In *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. 1984. Edited by B. Andrews & C. Bernstein. p131.

<sup>253</sup> See pages 78-80.

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

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

<sup>254</sup> Watten, B. 1999. ‘The Secret History of the Equal Sign:  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$  between Discourse and Text’. In *Poetics Today*. Volume 20, Number 4. Winter 1999. p596.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.* p602.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.* p620.

<sup>257</sup> See pages 74-75.

<sup>258</sup> See page 78.

<sup>259</sup> See page 79.

<sup>260</sup> See page 79.

writing<sup>261</sup>; the inclusion of symbols which appear to function iconically, but which actually do not<sup>262</sup>.

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

#### IV.

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

<sup>261</sup> See page 79.

<sup>262</sup> See pages 79-80.

<sup>263</sup> Connor, S. 1989. *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*. p121.

<sup>264</sup> Scobie, S. 1997. *Earthquakes and Explorations: Language and Painting from Cubism to Concrete Poetry*. p145.

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

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

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

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.* pp146-149.

<sup>266</sup> Shattcuck, R. In Scobie, S. 1997. *Earthquakes and Explorations: Language and Painting from Cubism to Concrete Poetry*. p147.

<sup>267</sup> Higgins, D. 1978. 'Pattern Poems'. In *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. 1984. Edited by B. Andrews & C. Bernstein. p86.

<sup>268</sup> Scobie, S. 1997. *Earthquakes and Explorations: Language and Painting from Cubism to Concrete Poetry*. p148.

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

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

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

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

<sup>269</sup> Higgins, D. 1989. 'Pattern Poetry as Paradigm'. In *Poetics Today*. Volume 10, Number 2. Summer 1989. pp403-404.

<sup>270</sup> Williams, E. 1958. *like attracts like*. In Higgins, D. 1989. 'Pattern Poetry as Paradigm'. In *Poetics Today*. Volume 10, Number 2. Summer 1989. p410.

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

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

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



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

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

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

<sup>17</sup> Bernstein, C. 1980, 'Untitled Poem' from *Language: A Periodical of Postwar American Poetry*, 1968, Edited by R. Frank & H. Sayre, p179.

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

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

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

<sup>271</sup> Bernstein, C. 1980. ‘Untitled Poem’ from *Trumps: A Periodical of Postcards*. In *The Line in Postmodern Poetry*. 1988. Edited by R. Frank & H. Sayre. p179.

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

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

<sup>272</sup> Storey, J. 2001. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. pp73-74.

<sup>273</sup> McCaffery, S. 1978. ‘Sound Poetry’. In *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*. 1984. Edited by B. Andrews & C. Bernstein. p88.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.* p88.

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

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

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

The French poet François Dufrêne is identified by McCaffery as having “pushed the limits”<sup>276</sup> of sound poetry considerably. However, when we consider his poem *Hurly-*

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.* p88.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.* p90.

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

*Bamboozle zula benzoline/ Ooze hullabaloo benzoin/ Crambo bowling limbo Boing<sup>277</sup>;*

*Germany many germinate/ Forget me not far gate minute/ Does he mean it? Mimoun in tow/  
Memento moon Ho-Chi-Mintha<sup>278</sup>.*

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

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

<sup>277</sup> Dufrêne, F. 1964. Excerpt from ‘Hurly-Burlyric Rock’. In *French Writing Today*. Edited by S.W. Taylor. p327.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.* p328.

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

### LANGUAGE movement

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

### irresolvable duality of the System of the Object

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

<sup>279</sup> See pages 138-139.

<sup>280</sup> Grenier, R. 1988. 'Bach Five' from *Line*. In *The Line in Postmodern Poetry*. 1988. Edited by R. Frank & H. Sayre. pp212-213.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.* p211.

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

We find an ironic metaphor in the poetry of Steve McCaffery which was referred to earlier<sup>281</sup>. At the end of the third part of McCaffery's extended work, *Panopticon*, we find V. repeated phrase, "and on"<sup>282</sup>, which occurs four-hundred-and-fifty times. Notwithstanding the fact that the preceding pages are not minimalist, this repetition

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>283</sup> See pages 26-27.

<sup>284</sup> McCaffery, S. 1994. From 'Panopticon'. In *From the Other side of the Century: A New American Poetry 1960-1990*. Edited by D. Messerli. pp1024-1025.



## PART FOUR

### OPAQUE WINDOWS: IN-/CONCLUSION

#### QUESTIONS

##### I.

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

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

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

## II.

*Question:* What is minimalism?

*Answer:* Minimalism is a term central in the discourse of impossibility. By discourse of impossibility, I mean nihilism. According to Vattimo the particular project of Nietzschean nihilism inaugurates the postmodern era<sup>1</sup>. However, the Nietzschean project proves a problematic proposition, since it advocates the view that nihilism is something to be overcome, drawing it back into constructive discourse and preventing its delivery on the *nothing*, the radical, originary alterity it promises, albeit obliquely.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Question:* What is literary minimalism?

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

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

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

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

*Question:* What is the minimalist literary object?

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

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

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

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

<sup>2</sup> Bedson, S. Extract from the *Trilogy*, p178. In Critchley, S. 1997. *They Laugh... When I Fall*. London: Philosophy, Literature, p173.

<sup>3</sup> Reichardt, A. 1975. *From Art-as-Art: Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*. London: The Museum of Modern Art, 1993. *Minimalism: Origins*, pp44-45.

<sup>4</sup> Durio, J. (lyrics) & Leigh, M. (music). 'To Dream the Impossible Dream' (No. 24). *South African* D. 1966. *The Man of La Mancha*.

## ECHOES

## I.

## OPAQUE WINDOWS

*These creatures have never been, only I and this black void have ever been. And the sounds? No, all is silent. And the lights, on which I had set such store, must they go out too? Yes, out with them, there is no light. No grey either, black is what I should have said. Nothing then but me, of which I know nothing, and this black, of which I know nothing except that it is black and empty. That then is what, since I have to speak, I shall speak of, until I need speak no more<sup>2</sup>.*

## II.

*No realism or existentialism...No impressionism...No expressionism or surrealism...No fauvism, primitivism, or brute art...No constructivism, sculpture, plasticism, or graphic arts. No collage, paste, paper, sand, or string...no 'tromp-l'oeil', interior decoration, or architecture...No texture...No brushwork or calligraphy...No sketching or drawing...no forms...No design...No colours...No light...no space...No time...No size or scale...No movement...No object, no subject, no matter. No symbols, images, or signs. Neither pleasure nor pain. No mindless working or mindless non-working. No chess-playing<sup>3</sup>*

## III.

*To dream the impossible dream...<sup>4</sup>*

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

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

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



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

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

In-/conclusion:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## APPENDIX A

Emmett Williams: *like attracts like*

like attracts like

like attracts like

like attracts like

like attracts like

like attracts like

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## APPENDIX B

Charles Bernstein: *untitled*

The image shows a page of dense, chaotic handwritten text. The writing is extremely dense and overlapping, with many lines crossing each other. Some words are legible, including "clean", "building", "Honey", "USSE", "399", "499", "549", "649", "749", "849", "949", "1049", "1149", "1249", "1349", "1449", "1549", "1649", "1749", "1849", "1949", "2049", "2149", "2249", "2349", "2449", "2549", "2649", "2749", "2849", "2949", "3049", "3149", "3249", "3349", "3449", "3549", "3649", "3749", "3849", "3949", "4049", "4149", "4249", "4349", "4449", "4549", "4649", "4749", "4849", "4949", "5049", "5149", "5249", "5349", "5449", "5549", "5649", "5749", "5849", "5949", "6049", "6149", "6249", "6349", "6449", "6549", "6649", "6749", "6849", "6949", "7049", "7149", "7249", "7349", "7449", "7549", "7649", "7749", "7849", "7949", "8049", "8149", "8249", "8349", "8449", "8549", "8649", "8749", "8849", "8949", "9049", "9149", "9249", "9349", "9449", "9549", "9649", "9749", "9849", "9949", "10049".