MINIMALISM, MODERNISM, AND THE AESTHETICS OF SCALE

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation argues that literary minimalism is rightfully understood as an effort to make literature unproductive. Minimal fiction retreats from the production of meaning as literature’s epiphenomenon. It thus carries out a revaluation of textual surfaces and a critique of the logic of accumulation that inevitably subsumes sensuous particularity.

Literary minimalism has previously been considered a movement among late-twentieth-century American short fiction writers who embraced a kind of brevity and tonal flatness that is invariably achieved through a deliberate process of exclusion in their fiction. Against this narrow view of minimalism, the project traces an original literary history of formal subtraction in the transnational narrative experiments of the last century. Through readings of Henry James, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Samuel Beckett, and Lydia Davis, I show how minimal writing renounces some of fiction’s most powerful tools. These writers often choose not to generate meaning by communicating and organizing information; they seek to build contingency, rather than significance, into their representations of the world. However, these projects for the weakening and lessening of literature’s expressive dominance also constitute a crucial alteration of its manner of address: towards embodied scale and concrete particularity.
Minimal fiction seeks to imagine encounters marked by an apparent paucity of meaningful content, even as it attempts, at the same time, to model a cognate experience through its form. The texts in this project evince various methods of paring down in order to make the sound and physical presence of words felt. In The Ambassadors, James creates a suspended style, an anti-clarity that renders words less transparent, less efficient purveyors of meaning. Joyce and Woolf use fragmentation to disrupt the smooth unspooling of narrative; as a result, we sense the pieced-together quality of representation and the poverty of insight at its ground. Beckett’s Worstward Ho makes language enact the unaccustomed function of worsening/lessening communication. And, more explicitly than the others, Davis insists on the impossibility of something “beyond” the concrete; paradoxically, she means both the concreteness of language and at least one horizon of meaning “beyond” this concreteness, that of physical description. So, in various ways, these texts seek to call up the scene of reading or listening. The impossibly slim political content of this effect lies not in its evocation of alternate ways or being or acting in the world, but in its indirect recollection of the world. In recalling the world it has forgotten—or, rather, in recalling us to the world we have forgotten—the work of minimal fiction offers a way of encountering vast scale empty of attributes. In so doing, minimal fiction resists the drive to subsume particularity.
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Introduction

I. Form and Worldliness

1. Modernism and Subtraction

Modernism has always been significantly associated with subtractive processes. Reduction, compression, and distillation are among literary modernism’s favored strategies for intensifying, heightening, or rarifying, as well as dismantling, undoing, and debasing fiction and poetry. At least in the terms forwarded by many modernists themselves, “making it new” often meant making it starker or plainer: stripping away the stale flourishes and ornaments of the past, transforming literature into something of purified intensity. Even our most flexible definition of modernism, as a “self-conscious break with tradition,” is unavoidably subtractive. What we have come to think of as “modernism” has been ineluctably shaped by a drive towards less.

We need look no further than the iconic manifestos of the 1910s to see the developing link between a new starkness in form and the heightening of its confrontational quality. Imagism’s primary statements in *Poetry*, 1913, called for “[d]irect treatment of the ‘thing’” using “absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation” (Flint 199). Wyndham Lewis’s “Vorticist” manifestos in *Blast* announced in stark typographic style (Fig. 1 and 2) a desire to “leave Nature and Men alone” and “[t]o make the rich of the community shed their education skin, to destroy politeness, standardization and academic, that is civilized, vision” (7).
Figure 1. Blast #1. Source: The Modernist Journals Project.

Figure 2. Blast #2. Source: The Modernist Journals Project.
Meanwhile, Tristan Tzara’s “Manifeste Dada 1918” proclaimed categorically, “Dada ne signifie rien” (Fig. 3).
And, of course, much of canonical modernism’s most frequently anthologized poetry seems in some way “minimal,” especially the Imagist classics: Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” (1913), H. D.’s “Oread” (1915), Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow” (1923), et cetera. Stein’s *Tender Buttons* (1914) looks austere in a certain light, as does Stevens’ “Anecdote of the Jar” (1919) or “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (1923) and some of Hughes’s more trenchant verse—“Suicide’s Note” (1925), for instance. Consider the coolly-detailed observances of Marianne Moore’s poetry and the angular abstraction of Mina Loy’s. Consider, too, the compact force of the Brechtian *gestus* and, further afield, visual art’s turn to abstraction and architecture’s to “primary forms” under the sway of Le Corbusier’s *Vers un architecture.*

Minimalism and modernism both gesture, at times, towards the impossible ideal of “pure form.” This rhetorical move, in turn, can be traced back to Wildean aestheticism, on the one hand, and French Symbolism, on the other. Not surprisingly, however, modernist poets often looked to visual art for models of formal purity. Constantin Brancusi’s bird sculptures (Fig. 4)—which were taxed as “raw material” by the U.S. Government—became a touchstone for both Pound and Loy.
“Brancusi,” Pound writes, “is meditating upon pure form free from all terrestrial gravitation; form as free in its own life as the form of the analytic geometers” (qtd. in Leighton 14). Loy’s poem, “Brancusi’s Golden Bird” (1922), enacts a series of negations, envisioning the titular sculpture as an “unwinged unplumed” form, pared-down “in gorgeous reticence” to the mere “nucleus of flight”:
Brancusi’s Golden Bird

1 The toy became the aesthetic archetype.

As if

some patient peasant God
5 had rubbed and rubbed
the Alpha and Omega
of Form
into a lump of metal

A naked orientation
10 unwinged unplumed
—the ultimate rhythm
has lopped the extremities
of crest and claw
from
15 the nucleus of flight

The absolute act
of art
conformed
to continent sculpture
20 —bare as the brow of Osiris—
this breast of revelation

an incandescent curve
licked by chromatic flames
in labyrinths of reflections

25 This gong
of hyperaesthesis
shrills with brass
as the aggressive light
strikes
30 its significance

The immaculate
conception
of the inaudible bird
occurs
35 in gorgeous reticence . . .
In fact, we might think of “Brancusi’s Golden Bird” as another kind of modernist/minimalist manifesto—one which proves its commitment to economy by shearing away the bluster and bombast of the traditional manifesto and its self-conscious claims, too. As Loy so elegantly shows, abstraction itself is a kind of restraint.

A tension persists in the poem, however, between its precise vocabulary and its various gestures towards music and mute material. In effect, the volume is turned up on the poem’s linguistic and anti-linguistic countermelodies. We hear Loy’s hyper-articulate exactitude, but we also hear her evocation of sound: “Brancusi’s Golden Bird” bristles with stops, fricatives, and alliteration, even as it pursues a musical vocabulary (“ultimate rhythm,” “chromatic flames,” “gong…/shrills with brass/…strikes,” “inaudible bird” [lines 11, 23, 25-29, 33]). As the poem calls to mind “inaudible” sound waves that originate in the metal and spread, invisibly, through space, we are reminded that form, here, has an especially tactile dimension. Not only is the metal “rubbed and rubbed” (line 5), the poem manifests a subtle eroticism throughout. The sculpture reveals “A naked orientation” (line 9); it is “The absolute act/of art” (16-17), “—bare as the brow of Osiris—/this breast of revelation” (20-21); and “The immaculate/conception” (31-32) is nonetheless attended by a “polished hyperaesthesia” (26). Thus, Loy reveals the forces and affects still buffeting form, even in abstraction. Form never quite leaves behind its associations with eroticism, even with violence. In order to arrive at that “nucleus of flight,” Loy reminds us, Brancusi has “lopped the extremities/of crest and claw” [12-13] from the living bird.

“Brancusi’s Golden Bird” lays bare some of the contradictions within the concept of “form,” especially as those contradictions are heightened by processes of subtraction.
The sculpture and the poem that renders it both attest to the lingering tension between form as *organic* versus form as *artificial*. Form’s organic connotations have not been entirely shed, even though they are often invoked through negation. Form is sensuous, embodied, surprising, and at the same time cerebral. Nor is the conflict between form’s totalizing and dispersing forces resolved. Loy’s reference to “the Alpha and Omega/of Form” (6-7) suggests form’s powerful unifying sweep, but the poem also enacts disintegration, using techniques of breaking apart—enjambment, dashes, spacing—against the bundling of sense-making semantic units. Indeed, “Brancusi’s Golden Bird” opens with a pronounced rupture between an indicative two-line stanza that is set apart from the rest of the poem by line three, “As if,” marking the remainder as subjunctive. The first two lines are syntactically conventional, but they are also utterly baffling.

In asking where the identity of form breaks down, minimalism makes many of these tensions central. Loy’s poem helps us to see how formalism itself has been shaped by minimalist impulses. Nonetheless, formalisms from the early twentieth-century to the present have typically associated form with complexity, difficulty, and aesthetic autonomy. As we will see, minimalist texts often attempt to unbind form from complexity, density, depth, and wholeness. On the one hand, in subtracting content, they seem to achieve a more complete autonomy from social reality; on the other hand, however, they reveal how “pure form” may dissolve, unpredictably, into form’s ubiquity, or even into formlessness. If, as Victor Shklovsky once suggested, it is the function of art to “make the stone stony” (12), subtractive aesthetics draw out the tautological minimalism of that construction: to make the stone stony is not a process of revealing its essential being, so much as it is a process of letting the stone be present *without*
explanation or rationale or significance. “Form, then, is what happens when all the various somethings—matter, content, message—have been got out of the way,” as Angela Leighton puts it. “Form, perhaps, is the sense of nothing” (263). Nonetheless, this sense of “nothing” also demarcates “something,” even if that something is only “the distribution of space caused by edging one thing against another, so that each calls attention to the other” (16).

2. Form in performance

Especially in the absence of subject matter, form seems to acquire tactility, as though what we cannot apprehend with the mind, we feel compelled to touch with the hands. Inspired by Walter Benjamin’s “On the Mimetic Faculty,” Michael Taussig has called this experience of form “tactile knowing” (25), where Benjamin’s “compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else” (qtd. 19) makes visual perception palpable. In one line of reasoning, Taussig writes, “contact and copy merge to become virtually identical, different moments of one process of sensing; seeing something or hearing something is to be in contact with that something” (21). Loy’s poem alludes to this contact when she draws out a process of vision through analogies to sound and touch. At the same time, “Brancusi’s Golden Bird” arouses a memory within “pure form” of human form, especially the form of the female (and the animal) body, and a fascination with—a desire to touch—naked skin in all its raced, sexed visibility. As Anne Anlin Cheng has recently reminded us, the obsession with surfaces that carries through modernism to minimalism is never far removed from the discourses of
primitivism and patriarchy.\textsuperscript{12} It is with this caveat in mind that I turn to the tactility of minimalist form.

Not only does minimalism enact a revaluation of surface that constantly recalls the notion of form as “superficial,” minimalism in various art forms strives to achieve a bodily scale of address. In its visual and literary incarnations, alike, minimalism foregrounds a markedly \textit{embodied} imaginary (see Fig. 5).

\textit{Figure 5. Eva Hesse, “Hang Up” (1966). Source: The Art Institute of Chicago.}
The seminal statement concerning this aspect of visual minimalism is Michael Fried’s influential polemic, “Art and Objecthood,” which identified “literal art” with theatricality. According to Fried, minimalism “aspires, not to defeat or suspend its own objecthood, but on the contrary to discover and project objecthood as such” (120). The result is “the effect of presence” and specifically “stage presence” (emphases original, 120, 127). Fried characterizes this presence as anthropomorphic: the experience of minimal art as “not…entirely unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another person” (128, see Fig. 6). However, Fried seems to admit that the “presence”

Figure 6. Various Artists, “Primary Structures,” Jewish Museum, New York (1966). Pictured are sculptures by Donald Judd (left) and Robert Morris (right). Source: Radford University Course Website.
he’s describing—“a kind of latent or hidden naturalism, indeed anthropomorphism” (129)—need not be human. This is an important distinction: the silence of minimal art (its lack of representational content) suggests something like animal presence, while the mechanistic qualities of pre-fabricated minimal art recall the Cartesian view of animals. Further, this instability within Fried’s own reading of minimalism—wherein “naturalism” slides into its apparent intensification, “anthropomorphism”—suggests a more significant problem with his analysis: its retention of “presence” as an apparently undisturbed (albeit vaguely disturbing) concept. Indeed, Fried himself affirms this value in a backhanded apology at the end of “Art and Objecthood.” Having spent the essay “distinguish[ing] between what is…the authentic art of our time and other work,” he writes: “In these last sentences…I want to call attention to the utter pervasiveness—the virtual universality—of the sensibility or mode of being that I have characterized as corrupted or perverted by theatre. We are all literalists most or all of our lives. Presentness is grace” (147).

Later critics have disputed many of Fried’s polemical claims, while retaining his central thesis about the viewer’s experience of minimal art objects. Hal Foster takes specific aim at “Art and Objecthood,” suggesting that the essay makes the category error I have alluded to, above: “even as the order of Enlightenment aesthetics is disrupted on all side in practice, it is reaffirmed in theory” (52). At the same time, Foster outlines two primary “misreadings” in the criticism of the period:

If the first great misreading is that minimalism is reductive, the second is that it is idealist. This was no less a misreading, made by some conceptual artists, too, when it was meant positively: that minimalism captures pure forms, maps logical structures, or depicts abstract thought. For it is precisely such metaphysical
dualisms of subject and object that minimalism seeks to overcome in phenomenological experience. Thus, far from idealist, minimalist work complicates the purity of conception with the contingency of perception, of the body in a particular space and time. …In a way the stake of minimalism is the nature of meaning and the status of the subject, both of which are held to be public, not private, produced in a physical interface with the actual world, not in a mental space of idealist conception. (40)

“In short,” he writes, “minimalism appears as a historical crux in which the formalist autonomy of art is at once achieved and broken up, in which the ideal of pure art becomes the reality of one more specific object among others” (emphases original, 54). Despite his insistence that “perception is made reflexive” (36), however, Foster denies that minimal art “initiate[s] a critique of subject,” except perhaps “in abstract terms” (44).13

Foster may have a point about the largely “abstract” critique latent in sculpture and painting, but the same cannot be said with such confidence in other arenas. I’m primarily referring to performance art. To speak of the “performativity” of visual minimalism, as Maurice Berger does, is to draw an analogy informed by an historical and aesthetic intimacy.14 Minimalism and performance art (as well as minimalist performance art) share aesthetic antecedents in Dada and Futurist performance, but the two fields also developed symbiotically, with practitioners regularly crossing the boundaries between art forms.15 But whereas minimal art only obliquely—in theory—confronts the nexus of space-time in which it appears, performance art frequently sought (and seeks) to make that nexus a focus. As Elin Diamond puts it, “[P]erformance art attempts, futilely of
course, the uncoupling of aesthetic space-time; space is what performers inhabit as time simply continues” (144).

“Performativity” imagines form as “present” and sets it in motion. The verb “perform” is after all etymologically related to form in—and moving through—space and time.16 Performance is a kind of minimalism, making use of that most economical of means, gesture; at the same time, the performing body confronts the spectator with its excessiveness. Even as it mobilizes human form, performance dallies with formlessness. Finally, performance experiments with the very “presence” to which minimal art aspires, playing with it in a deconstructive mood but never fully dispensing with it (if such an act were possible). In postmodern performances, Diamond writes, “Presence…is never simply present. The ‘auratic’ uniqueness of the performer’s body, its apparent ‘unity’ as logical and experiential home of the subject, is dispersed by its ‘own’ discourse, the discourse it cannot own” (151). Or, as Peggy Phelan puts it, “In performance, the body is metonymic of self, of character, of voice, of ‘presence.’ But in the plenitude of its apparent visibility and availability, the performer actually disappears and represents something else—dance, movement, sound, character, ‘art’” (150). Nonetheless, performance never stops “implicat[ing] the real through the presence of living bodies” (148). And: “In the sense that I do my performance in public, for spectators who are interpreting and/or performing with me, there are real effects, meanings solicited or imposed that produce relations in the real,” Diamond writes. “The point is, as soon as performativity comes to rest on a performance, questions of embodiment, of social relations, of ideological interpellations, of emotional and political effects, all become discussable” (Introduction, 5).
As we will see, many of the antinomies inflecting performance also lend minimal fiction its oppositional character. Performance and performativity are especially salient to my last two chapters, in which the space(s) of theater and performance take on special significance as the primary formal analogies upon which Samuel Beckett and Lydia Davis found the minimal politics of their fiction. But the idea of performativity is relevant to the project as a whole since, as my description above suggests, performance artists have carried out some the last century’s most nuanced and relevant thinking on language and embodiment. The texts in this project going back to Henry James are engaged in an impossible effort to make literature unproductive, to escape or retreat from the production of meaning as literature’s epiphenomenon. Rather that acceding to the logic of exchange, *The Ambassadors* sends its readers away empty-handed. James Joyce engages directly with dramatic form as a method for evading, then later flipping of the terms of, interiority, and he portrays performance (specifically Bartell D’Arcy’s hoarse singing) as quiet resistance to the logic of nationalism. Meanwhile, Virginia Woolf in *Jacob’s Room* casts doubt on the assumption of sameness that makes possible a kind of conceptual shuttling between the specificity of Jacob’s body and the generality of young men killed in the war. These capacities—or, rather, incapacities—are uniquely tied to what Phelan calls the “nonreproductive, nonmetaphorical” aspect of performance: “Performance approaches the Real through resisting the metaphorical reduction of the two into the one. But in moving from the aims of metaphor, reproduction, and pleasure to those of metonymy, displacement, and pain, performance marks the body itself as a loss. Performance is the attempt to value that which is nonreproductive, nonmetaphorical” (152). “[P]erformance is vulnerable to charges of valuelessness and emptiness” (148)
because it “honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value that leaves no visible trace afterward” (149).

In one sense, minimal fiction, too, constitutes a failed attempt to leave no trace. Yet this is not the whole story, either. As Susan Sontag pointed out several decades ago in “The Aesthetics of Silence,” there is no undialectical silence: “Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech (in many instances, of complaint or indictment) and an element in dialogue” (section IV). John Cage’s 4’33’’ revealed, above all, the accuracy of this statement. Into the void that silence allegedly opens up rushes ambient noise: in the first performance of 4’33’’, birds singing; people breathing, coughing; all the otherwise ignored sound of a shared public space. As Laurie Anderson has remarked, to attend to emptiness (as in Zen) is a “practice of awareness, to see things as they are, to let them be” (Monroe 398). Thus, as Sontag maintains,

…these programs for art's impoverishment must not be understood simply asterroristic admonitions to audiences, but as strategies for improving the audience’s experience. The notions of silence, emptiness, reduction, sketch out new prescriptions for looking, hearing, etc.—specifically, either for having a more immediate, sensuous experience of art or of confronting the art work in a more conscious, conceptual way. (VI)

II. The Literary, Depleted

1. Why fiction?

While many of the texts in this project exhibit obvious minimalist aesthetic traits, including brevity, fragmentation, austere style, I define minimalism primarily along the
lines of its relationship to meaning. Specifically, minimal fiction declines to generate meaning primarily from the representation of the world; indeed, in some cases, it overturns the common aspirations of narrative towards organizing and conveying information in order to make its significance legible. Instead, minimal fiction seeks to imagine encounters marked by an apparent paucity of meaningful content, even as it attempts, at the same time, to model a cognate experience through its form.

Reduction, diminution, and subtraction tend to confound the expectations triggered by genre. When something is palpably stripped away from a text, it is not necessarily the poverty of language that comes to the fore; ironically, just as often, the unavoidable non-minimalism of language becomes more visible. As much as I will draw comparisons between linguistic minimalism and non-linguistic, gestural minimalism of various types, in the end this dialectical tension is most available in linguistic arts, and especially fiction. Language means; language proliferates. The uses and misuses of each word and phrase cross and recross it. Language carries its histories—personal, social, and political. It is our constant companion, a tool readier and more potent than any other. It reaches at all times towards an audience, even if that audience is only the self reading/hearing the self. Writing yearns for the world—to be in it and of it. In minimal literature, that tropism is not cancelled, but revealed.

This does not mean that minimal fiction is “about” the world in the sense of a conventional representational text. On the contrary, even when it is ostensibly realistic, minimal fiction seeks to heighten its own objecthood. In so doing, it rejects or sidesteps the hierarchical relationship with the world that “about” implies. That is, to say a work of fiction is “about” something else is to proceed in replacing its specificity with general
meaning; the work itself is discarded and “replaced by its meaning.” In this vein, Sontag indicts writers who are “overcooperative” (“Against” 8) and content that is “peculiarly visible, handier, more exposed” (11). If suspicious reading “indicates a dissatisfaction with the work, a wish to replace it by something else” (10), works that easily disclose their allegorical significance seem to invite their own replacement.

Critics have always understood “literary minimalism” to refer to fiction that categorically embraces the allegorical move from the specificity of the work to its implied “deeper” meanings. In this sense, the work of Ernest Hemingway and his aesthetic descendants is, in fact, a heightened realism, where the conspicuousness of occlusion implies to the reader that everything—or its trace—may be in the work, in the sense of having been imagined, even written, then removed. The silences of this so-called “minimalism” are “brooding ellipses into the vast emptiness of the all-to[o]-realistic [sic] beyond” (McGurl 376). This process of selection is an intensification of the reality effect which, Barthes tells us, arises directly from a dialectic of inclusion and exclusion. This is why “encyclopedic” and “maximalist” works tend to admit their incommensurability much more readily than Carverian “minimalism.” Accordingly, what has been called “literary minimalism” has always been writing magnificently under the author’s control. “The very shortness of the short forms associated with minimalism…puts ‘mastery of form,’ a solid sense of completion, within visible reach of the student,” Mark McGurl writes. “The highly disciplined artifacts thus created are the work, simultaneously, of an externalization or expression of ‘authorial selfhood’ as story and of the disciplined reconfiguration of the self through the patient labor of counterfactual fiction making” (294). Purging, the author controls everything under the
sun: what goes uncreated, what is undone, as well as what basks in the daylight of
existence. It the ultimate fantasy of the artist’s authority. What has been called “literary
minimalism” is nowhere near Beckett’s determination, in Worstward Ho, to “fail better”
with language; it is closer to pop culture’s recent repurposing of “Fail better” as a motto
for cheerful self-improvement. Leaving things out is a way to write more efficiently and
to look smarter doing it.

This definition of “literary minimalism” arguably comes down to us in its current
form through John Barth, who in 1986 published “A Few Words About Minimalism” in
The New York Times Book Review. For Barth, minimalism’s “cardinal principle is that
artistic effect may be enhanced by a radical economy of artistic means, even where such
parsimony compromises other values: completeness, for example, or richness or precision
of statement.” He suggests that minimalism and maximalism have constituted art’s two
poles since antiquity; for him, the minimalism of “Kmart realism” is merely a response to
the large-scale, “byzantine” and “baroque” postmodern novel in America. But his many
examples are historically and formally various, and the essay more or less relies on list-
making as a substitute for the actual description of aesthetic attributes. Indeed, as the
list form itself implies, more does not always occasion precision; list-making, like
ekphrasis, may generate a sense of the asymptotic approach to the object, without
arriving at a complete, accurate picture of it. In this case, Barth includes examples of so-
called “minimalism” that have little in common besides something like an “economy of
means.” And despite his insistence that minimalism’s “kissing cousin” is realism, fewer
of his examples fall safely under that designation than those that do not. Yet this essay’s
definition of minimalism—and its condemnation of “Dick-and-Jane prose” for people
with short attention spans—has had an outsize influence on the critical definition and assessment of literary minimalism.

Why have so few critics wondered at the juxtaposition, here, of such disparate formal entities? What do Carver’s “The Bath” (or its longer iteration, “A Small, Good Thing”) have to do with Reinhardt’s “black paintings”? Or, for that matter, with Beckett’s late trilogy, which appeared at the same time as Carver’s major collections? Considering the relatively consistent use across other art forms—and even in everyday conversation—“minimalism” is emphatically a misnomer when applied to conventionally representational realist fiction like Carver’s. The persistence of this use of the word is due, in part, to convenience: it is almost always a dismissal. So, for instance, when Robert Rebein seeks to redeem Carver’s short fiction, he does so with recourse to depth; when he wants to dispense with others, he asserts their superficiality. Similarly, as we shall see, most critics over the years have agreed that Henry James is good when he is deep and bad when he is all style. “Minimalist” may be one of the last watchwords of covert acts of assessment in literary criticism. To disentangle it from its misuses is to wade into a bog of closely held assumptions and beliefs about what makes literature worth reading and studying: that literariness is an effect of a use of language that enhances its richness; that we derive a special type of meaning from acts of interpretation; that literary language both deepens our experience of the world and constitutes, itself, an experience of depth.

Critics practicing various methods of so-called “surface reading,” including “new formalism,” have begun to challenge precisely this view of literary works—or at least to assert that reading for depth is not the only legitimate way to read. This debate is in fact
internal to the minimal fiction in this project, which provokes readers to consider the outcomes and consequences of depth’s renunciation. By virtue of its form, minimalism is a superlatively mobile aesthetic. It has become aggressively corporatized, as anyone with a glossy white iPad (sans stylus, of course: “Think Different”) knows well. “Minimalism is now a way of decorating suburban kitchens,” Timothy Morton writes (153). And Ross Posnock notes that some anti-essentialist ways of thinking, adjacent to minimalist priorities, have been used for horrific purposes. “Respect for the human limits of reason and for the world as phenomenal appearance rather than knowable essence: this hardly sounds incendiary. Yet any philosophy that validates the pre-cognitive is vulnerable in certain historical moments to hijacking by demagogues promulgating a cult of unreason” (loc. 1010). Posnock is speaking of philosophy, but his point is equally salient in the aesthetic realm. This “vulnerability,” however, only reinforces the need to understand how renunciatory aesthetics work. I will not go so far as to suggest that minimalism’s uses have been misuses or misreadings. However, I will suggest that minimal literature has much to show us about surfaces and about reading as a navigation between registers and scales of meaning, in which a text’s surfaces are always urgent.

2. “Materials as materials”

In other aesthetic arenas, minimalism refers not only to an economy of means—to Barth’s misleading “less is more”—but to a reduction of effects (i.e. a retreat from representation and expressiveness in painting and sculpture, from embellishment, tonal complexity, and section development in music) and a concomitant foregrounding of materials (the canvas and/or paint; the concrete, acrylic, wood; or, in music, sound qua
sound, the timbre or sonority of the instrument, ambient noise, or drones). “In its simplest definition,” Edward Strickland offers, “Minimalism is a style distinguished by severity of means, clarity of form, and simplicity of structure and texture” (4). The work of art is “rendered with a minimum of incident or compositional maneuvering” (Colpitt qtd. in Meyer, 3). James Meyer writes, “Minimal work does not allude to anything beyond its literal presence, or its existence in the physical world. Materials appear as materials” (15).

So far, I have for the most part neglected the duty of an introduction to set forth a definition of my topic and to outline how the project supports and elaborates that definition. I have spoken, already, of the linked worldliness, tactility, and performativity of minimal form; I have implied that the texts in this project achieve this form through subtraction. This project claims to establish a new genealogy of minimal literature based on similarities with minimalism in other art forms. Accordingly, minimal fiction makes two primary turns that correspond to those illustrated above: first, the foregrounding of “materials” (in this case, the materiality of language and of the page) and, second, a retreat from or renunciation of literature’s meaning-making function. Since language occupies the status of both instrument (brush) and material (paint and canvas) in literary works—and since it is meaningful in itself, in a way paint and canvas are not—the “turns” I have just mentioned inevitably entail internal tensions that are not present in visual minimalism. As a result, I often describe literary minimalism as a dynamic relationship with generic expectations—as a process towards less, rather than an achieved nullity.
To wit, these texts do not leave representation behind entirely, and silence has a different import than nonsense. But even when the texts in this project are not particularly experimental syntactically or, on the sentence-level, semantically, they evince various methods of paring down in order to make the sound and physical presence of words felt. In *The Ambassadors*, James creates a suspended style, an anti-clarity that renders words less transparent, less efficient purveyors of meaning. Joyce and Woolf use fragmentation to disrupt the smooth unspooling of narrative; as a result, we sense the pieced-together quality of representation and the poverty of insight at its ground. Beckett’s *Worstward Ho* makes language enact the unaccustomed function of worsening/lessening communication. And, more explicitly than the others, Davis insists on the impossibility of something “beyond” the concrete; paradoxically, she means both the concreteness of language and at least one horizon of meaning “beyond” this concreteness, that of physical description. So, in various ways, these texts seek to call up the scene of reading or listening. Prompted by these writings themselves, I see this attempt to repel absorption and return us to our specific, embodied, contextual reading experience as a quietly political move that takes on different valences in these texts. The impossibly slim political content of this effect lies not in its evocation of alternate ways or being or acting in the world, but in its *indirect recollection* of the world. Minimal fiction thus embraces Theodor Adorno’s resonant dictum: “It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men’s heads” (“Commitment” 180). In recalling the world it has forgotten—or in recalling us to the world we have forgotten—the work of minimal fiction offers a way of
encountering vast scale *empty of attributes*. In so doing, minimal fiction resists the drive to subsume particularity.

Whereas minimalist sculpture derives its undifferentiated “presence” from a “nonrelational...unitary...wholistic” character (Fried 129), minimal literature declines to present a “unitary object.” Instead, the link between part and whole is a source of self-reflexive critique. One difference, then, between minimal literature as I describe it and minimalist sculpture is in its restless, searching critique of movement between scales. And I take this movement to be constitutive of fiction. Here, it may be useful to turn to Timothy Bewes, who writes of this navigation between scales as the work of exemplarity:

Exemplarity is a conceptual relationship in which the parts of a work are linked to a whole. The “whole” in this formulation is not just the whole of the work but that of a world of which the work is a part, and to which the work and the exemplary instance within it are tied by the work’s claim to relevance, to legibility.

Exemplarity is the fabric of connectivity in which the literary work has its being. It is the always-unstated logic according to which readers identify with the characters of a work, or by which they may search in it for indications of how to live.

Exemplarity is a bridge between the world *about* which we read and the world *in* which we read; it links the sensuous and the conceptual. (1)

Bewes suggests that exemplarity “is always under pressure in the novel; exemplary relations never demonstrably exhaust the elements of the work, even while exemplarity ensures a level of semiotic stratification without which every novel would be meaningless, unreadable” (7-8). However, one way to put my argument, here, is to suggest that minimalism resists the “stratification” to which Bewes refers. This is because
while minimal fiction reveres the concrete, it also evacuates detail: the concrete detail just is. Writing of Joyce and Woolf, I call this emptiness and heightened intensity of the isolated moment “the unsummable fragment”: a fragment that makes no conceptual whole (or that points to the flattening conceptual nature of all wholes).

“No accumulation without subtraction”—another motto, of sorts, from my chapter on Woolf and Joyce—sounds like a contradiction in terms. It is meant to point to minimalism’s evacuation of exemplarity as a means for grasping totality. In so doing, minimal literature cautions against the too-rapid movement of thought to concepts that forget earthy particularity. Returning us to the scene of reading, minimal literature reminds us that this scene is inevitably embodied and social.

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1 “For the self-conscious break with tradition must, I think, be seen as the hallmark of modernism, the one feature that seems capable of lending the concept a critical coherence that most of us can agree on, however we may choose to approach and interpret it. …There appears to be no uniting, mutual element, unless it be negation: in the break with tradition” (Eysteinsson, The Concept of Modernism, 52).

2 Modernist painting’s move towards abstraction could also be considered “subtractive.” Certainly, for the visual minimalist abstraction was a necessary (but incomplete) step away from straightforward representation.

3 The minimalism of Le Corbusier and his aphoristic Vers un architecture had a tremendous influence on architecture and urban planning. Sigfried Giedion’s Space, Time, and Architecture describes architectural modernism’s “lightness”—a product of its use of glass and iron materials—as an insight derived from the Cubists, who, according to Giedion, “observe seriously objects which seemed unworthy of interest” and insisted that “one must have the courage to take small things and raise them to large dimensions” (4).


6 These competing notions of form have a very long history both within and outside of literary studies, going back to Aristotle, who derives his theory of form as an internal governing principle from natural objects, in comparison with manmade objects (Lear 15-54). Concerning literature, Coleridge is perhaps the most influential voice on the
distinction between organic and mechanic form. For Coleridge, organic form “is innate; it shapes as it develops from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form” (qtd. in Abrams 101); organic form is significantly associated with unity. As Raymond Williams suggest, this is the conflict contained in the word’s two primary senses, “span[n]ing the whole range from external and superficial to the inherent and determining.” He articulates these competing definitions thus: form as “a visible or outward shape, with a strong sense of the physical body” and as “an essential shaping principle, making indeterminate material into a determinate or specific being or thing” (138). See Jonathan Lear, “Nature,” in Aristotle: the desire to understand.

Caroline Levine note that form’s totalizing or unifying import has been historically ascendant—and politically problematic—in literary studies. She writes that for many critics the terms “totality,” “unity,” “containment,” and “wholeness” “are synonymous with form itself. To speak of the form of the work is to gesture to its unifying power, its capacity to hold together disparate parts” (24). Levine’s chapter, “Whole,” gives a good summary of how the view of form—as-unity—and an engagement with its political implications—have shaped literary studies.

Marjorie Levenson has pointed out that complexity is a central motivation and goal of “New Formalism,” which seeks to respect the text’s formal complexity—Levenson speaks of “learned submission to its myriad textual prompts” (560)—and to reproduce complexity through an experience of form.

“Form made by humans is a distinct phenomenon,” T. J. Clark has written, “but to separate the human from the natural is, as usual, hubris” (4). If, as Clark asserts, “Form is controlled repetition,” then “[n]o firm boundary can be drawn between ‘art’ and many other repetitive practices” (7). Form suddenly appears everywhere, because form is the appearance of a minimal order: repetition and its difference.

See Chapter 1 of Leighton’s book for an overview of the intellectual history of “form” from Plato to contemporary criticism. In particular, Leighton brings out a series of polarities within the term, beginning with the “platonic problem, of form which is both ‘essential’, yet becomes visible or ‘manifest’ in ‘material things’” (1), and carrying through “form” as process (verb) and a property of a finished object (noun), alive and dead, organic and inorganic; as “something which pivots between world and mind” (8); as an object of perception in Romantic aesthetics to “an object of touch” for Aestheticism (10); as abstracted altogether from meaning but “register[ing] the contrary pressure of significance” (13).

“‘It hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him, it thus acquired a tactile quality,’ Benjamin pointed out with respect to Dada artworks, which he thus considered as promoting a demand for film, ‘the distracting element of which is also primarily tactile’” (Taussig 25).

Cheng writes, “For Freud, Loos, and, half a generation later, Le Corbusier, ‘man’ becomes civilized—and his surroundings modernized—by renouncing primitive proclivities. The discourse of the ‘pure’ modern surface thus produces a nexus of metonymic meanings—purity, cleanliness, simplicity, anonymity, masculinity, civilization, technology, intellectual abstraction—that are set off against notions of excessive adornment, inarticulate sensuality, femininity, backwardness” (25).
“[M]inimalism considers perception in phenomenological terms, as somehow before or outside history, language, sexuality, and power. In other words, it does not regard the subject as a sexed body positioned in a symbolic order any more than it regards the gallery or the museum as an ideological apparatus” (43).

Berger writes, “The performative nature of minimalist art and dance is in its freedom from the conceits and historical allusions of traditional art objects, its foregrounding of the viewer as an equal player in the aesthetic experience, and its creation of phenomenological games in which the self is explored through unscripted, temporal interaction with external forces and objects. This performativity has made it remarkably well suited to examining the social and cultural contingencies of representation and identity and to contesting the repressive ways in which meaning, and even selfhood itself, are dictated by a priori social constructions. (16-17)

For Berger, a reading of minimalism is incomplete without its performance complements: “It is important to acknowledge that the radicalism of minimalist dance and sculpture of the mid-1960s…[emerged from] the unusual convergence of the visual arts (including minimalist and conceptualist performance, fluxus environments, happenings, conceptual art, minimalist sculpture) with avant-garde dance” (29 n.22).

See Kristine Stiles, “Performance Art and the Experiential Present,” and RoseLee Goldberg on dance and minimalism in her introduction to performance art (141-144). To cite a few examples from these texts: Sculptor Robert Morris also created performances, including Site (1965) with Carolee Schneemann (Goldberg 142); Yvonne Rainer prefaced a 1966 script with a “Quasi Survey of Some ‘Minimalist’ tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity” (143); performance and visual artist Adrian Piper has professed the influence of minimalism on her work (Berger 48); and visual and performance artists alike (including Piper, Yoko Ono, Laurie Anderson, John Cage, and others) were influenced by Zen Buddhism, yogic discipline, and other Eastern philosophies during the period (see Monroe, The Third Mind).

See OED on Latin prefix “per-”: 1a. “through, in space or time” (as in “pervade” or “perambulate”).

My thanks to Elin Diamond for first suggesting the language of “unproductivity” as a way to describe Jamesian style.

Citing Paul Valéry on the difference between prose and poetry, Ross Posnock writes, “Prose has a utilitarian mandate—to express aims, wishes, and commands—that annuls itself upon achieving its goal; [Valéry] always analogizes prose to walking: the end absorbs the means, ‘only the result remains.’ ‘I shall know I am understood by the remarkable fact that my discourse no longer exists. It is entirely and definitively replaced by its meaning’” (loc. 758).

The usual suspects, here, are Frederick Barthelme, Ann Beattie, Bobbie Ann Mason, Mary Robison and, above all, Raymond Carver.

For McGurl, “the excisions and understatements that are the hallmark of minimalism…can be understood as analogous to the self-protective concealments, like shielding the eyes, triggered before, during, and after the fact of shameful exposure” (294).

The descriptions that produce the reality effect are explicitly “a kind of narrative luxury,” “superfluous (in relation to structure)” (141). Descriptive detail is included in order to “signify…the category of ‘the real’”:
This is what we might call the referential illusion. The truth of this illusion is this: eliminated from the realist speech-act as a signified of denotation, the “real” returns to it as a signified of connotation; for just when these details are reputed to denote the real directly, all that they do—without saying so—is signify it; Flaubert’s barometer, Michelet’s little door finally say nothing but this: we are the real; it is the category of “the real” (and not its contingent contents) which is then signified; in other words, the very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the signifier of realism: the reality effect is produced, the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity. (The Rustle of Language 148)

22 “The rise of total war discourse effectively placed the present inside the political logic of epic, a logic that made war both the crucible and the connective matrix of any given national totality. To write in full-throated epic mode in the age of total war would be to accept the premise of Achilles’ shield: that full militarization is the best, and maybe only, occasion for world portraiture. Set beside such an epic premise, the fragmentariness and internal fissuring of long modernist fictions begin to look less like the flaws through which a longed-for totality seeped away and more like a critical refusal of epic’s all-too-vital political logic” (Saint-Amour 185).

23 For a dissenting view of the maximalist novel’s completeness, see Stefano Ercolino, The Maximalist Novel from Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño’s 2666. Examining the play of chaos and cosmos in the maximalist novel, Stefano Ercolino falls on the side of cosmos, noting his examples’ multiple strong structuring principles. “Nothing excludes, in fact, that the abundance of character voices and diegetic material in maximalist fiction can be lodged within a container, a structure able to give form to the diegesis and to establish its confines. And this is precisely what occurs in our novels,” he writes (78).

24 Barth’s examples include:

- Minimalism: visual/architectural modernism (Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, as well as Gaudier-Brzeska, Malevich, Reinhardt, Rothko, Newman); “hyperrealistic, slightly plotted, extrospective, cool-surfaced” American short fiction of the 1980s; “Aesop’s fables and Theophrastus’ ‘Characters’”; the palindrome; “supercompressive poetic forms”; “feudal Japanese haiku”; the short story (Poe, Maupassant, Chekhov, Hemingway); “The Bauhaus Functionalists”; Samuel Beckett; the Catholic via negativa
- Maximalism: “the three-decker Victorian novel”; “the large-scale classical prose pleasures of Herodotus, Thucydides, and Petronius”; “verse epics” (the Iliad, Odyssey, and Aeneid, as well as the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Kathasaritsagara); American postmodern fiction (Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, and Barth himself); Walt Whitman; Gabriel García Márquez; the Catholic via affirmative

25 Rebein cites Barth and Madison Smartt Bell, who commits a cardinal grade-school sin when he defines “minimalism” as “a trim, ‘minimal’ style, an obsessive concern for surface detail, a tendency to ignore or eliminate distinctions among the people it renders, and a studiedly deterministic, at times nihilistic, vision of the world” (“Less is less” Harper’s). Of later so-called “minimalists,” such as Amy Hempel, Rebein writes: “To be sure, we are given plenty of Hemingway’s tip of the iceberg, but by the time we finish the
story we are far from believing that anything substantial remains below the surface” (39). But even he briefly acknowledges that the assessment relies on a very specific rubric for what fiction ought to look like: “the problem with minimalism as it came to be practiced by writers such as Amy Hempel, Frederick Barthelme, and others was that, unlike Hemingway and Carver, these later writers did not seem to be meticulously cutting fat from stories that said too much; rather they seemed to be cynically knocking out stories that deliberately said too little. This is a damning assessment, to be sure—if you agree with Bell’s basic assumptions about plot, character, dialogue, and motivation” (emphasis added, 35).

26 See “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” Best and Marcus, and “Close but not Deep,” and Love 2013, and Love 2010 for a discussion of “surface reading,” one (set of) response(s) to this bias for depth in literary studies. Of interpretation, Love writes:

Interpretation is defined by a tension between demystification and what he calls the ‘restoration of meaning.’ Interpretation as a recollection of meaning returns us to the realm of sacred hermeneutics; according to Ricoeur, it is this faith in 'a revelation through the word' that 'animates [his] research.'...The 'depth' of 'depth hermeneutics' should be understood not only as the hidden structures or causes that suspicious critics reveal. Depth is also a dimension that should be understood not only as the hidden structures or causes that suspicious critics reveal. Depth is also a dimension that critics attempt to produce in their readings, by attributing life, richness, warmth, and voice to texts. (“Close but not Deep,” 387-388)


27 Strickland gives a longer, more historically specific definition a few pages later: “Minimalism is here used to denote a movement, primarily in postwar America, towards an art—visual, musical, literary, or otherwise—that makes its statement with limited, if not the fewest possible, resources, an art that eschews abundance of compositional detail, opulence of texture, and complexity of structure. Minimalist art is prone to stasis…and resistant to development. …It tends towards non-allusiveness and decontextualization from tradition, impersonality in tone, and flattening of perspective through emphasis on surfaces…” (7).
Chapter 1. Henry James and the Novel of Surface

I. The Ambassadors’ Minimalism

The term “minimalism” came into broad use half a century after Henry James’s death. In its historical sense, it describes a movement in the visual arts that rejected representational content, even in its abstracted form, while foregrounding materials and construction. To call James’s writing “minimalist”—or even to offer it as a key precursor to later subtractive projects—thus challenges the received historical and aesthetic limits of the designation. Nor does James’s work accord with the ubiquitous colloquial use of “minimal” to capture something like the impression or aperçu of less. Indeed, on the face of it, the ways in which we tend to think of his writing—intricate, dense, verbose, baroque in style, morally substantial—all imply fullness, complexity, and depth. However, this chapter shows that James often undermines novelistic richness with the very qualities of fictional representation from which it seems to ensue.

Rather than defining literary minimalism through length and tone, this project considers the withdrawal of literary works like The Ambassadors from the novel’s standard meaning-making functions. These functions include not only traditional elements of plot and realistic description, but also the gradual accretion of facts and frameworks amenable to interpretation. Whereas a non-minimal novel builds toward historical, cultural, and psychological insights through the accumulation of detail—and a “maximalist” novel might parodically recapitulate this additive method—a minimalist novel continually undermines prose’s productivity. James’s writing doesn’t look like literature we recognize as minimal: it is neither brief, nor simple, nor tonally flat or undifferentiated. Yet its very surface density toggles between the profound and the
“merely” stylistic. Knotted, circuitous sentences approach their objects with extreme delicacy and hesitation. Clauses and qualifiers accumulate, but rather than clarifying or adding detail, they mass into a dense linguistic fog, a thick blankness. H. G. Wells’ satirical portrait, *Boon,* once called this effect “the elaborate, copious emptiness of the whole Henry James exploit” (par. 107). More recently, Leo Bersani has written of “the at times staggering thinness of meaning in James’s late novels” (212). This “copious emptiness” and “staggering thinness” evoke the expansive yet unproductive surfaces of Jamesian style.

Thus, minimalism also connotes a kind of superficial writing. Meaning has not disappeared, per se, but its coordinates have changed. At its most minimal, *The Ambassadors*’ evasive style becomes a serious hindrance to sense and content; one might even say style is the meaning of James’s late fiction. Richard Poirier implies as much in *The Comic Sense of Henry James,* writing, “Readers of his [James’s] books sometimes act as if they are obliged to get beyond everything that is obvious, including their ‘merely’ personal reactions to it, so as to reach the supposedly deeper realms of meaning. As a consequence, the word ‘meaning’ has become associated not with what we experience as we read but merely with what we figure out after we are through” (10). In a later essay on James, Poirier renews this criticism, bemoaning the critical insistence that “style must finally be about something else, and this requires us to look behind it for big meanings and big truths” (239). As Poirier’s spatial metaphor implies, the minimalism of James’s style generates an unusual rapport between surface and depth: the surface of the text—its style—seems especially salient and the content it conveys, oddly distant. Indeed, much of James’s writing lends itself to metaphors of surface and depth for this reason.
This, in turn, presents a challenge to interpretation. Perhaps as a result, two major strands of recent James criticism have tended to remain distinct despite their shared concern with the evasiveness of James’s style: the “parallel preoccupations with style and sexuality have remained separate—and have even seemed inimical—in critical readings of James,” Kevin Ohi writes (2). Ohi’s work ingeniously brings the two strands together by showing that “the daunting complexity of James’s writing is its queerness” (2)—in other words, by lodging the erotic in the linguistic. Emphasizing the resolute unproductivity of Jamesian style, this essay argues against a view of James’s writing as proliferating meaning, either through sheer complexity or through its refusal to speak of sexuality, commerce, or networks of power.² My argument, here, is more closely aligned with readings like Ohi’s, which are attentive to the non-psychological and non-realistic surface of style in James. At the same time, however, I suggest that The Ambassadors may use minimal tactics to invite and reflect on both ways of reading. The question of meaning’s location is currently a vexed one in literary studies, with advocates of “surface reading” contesting the notion of meaning as coded beneath a text’s deceptive surface.³ As always, individual texts are hardly the inert objects of this debate. Some may polarize our reading practices not because they are either misleadingly conventional or overtly experimental, but because they appear to undermine depth through various tactics making surface primary. The novels of James’s major phase, apparently rich but curiously depthless in style, are just such texts.

Yet the problem of meaning’s location is especially acute in The Ambassadors, which stages a confrontation with another form of representation—advertising—that manipulates meaning’s coordinates. Advertising is in many ways the prototypical
symptomatic text: a dazzling surface hiding patently libidinous and ideological depths. The Ambassadors’ portrayal of Chad Newsome as future-ad-man registers distinct anxiety about the rise of advertising, but the novel does not model a posture of suspicion in response to this threat. Jonathan Freedman has demonstrated that James’s writing shares with advertising a debt to the British aestheticist movement, which for Freedman provides an “imaginative structure” (111) to American advertisers; The Ambassadors probes this relationship between its own modes of representation and those of advertising. Counterintuitively, however, it presents its commitment to the experience of aesthetic surfaces as the antidote to advertising’s implied departure from materiality. Advertising, here, is in some sense representationally maximal: it seems to be all about the object’s surfaces, when in fact the object itself becomes irrelevant, replaced by the heady press of its significations. It encourages a specious form of interpretation, we might say, that proceeds immediately beyond the sensuous surface of the object. Thus, Jackson Lears argues, “The Ambassadors in effect accuses advertising of dematerializing material life by disconnecting objects from their moment and milieu” (393), while Bill Brown writes that in advertisements “[t]he physical object, insufficient in itself, comes to be supplanted by the abstraction of significance” (14). The Ambassadors’ minimal styles refuse the “dematerializing” “abstraction of significance”: the illusion of a deep “truth” hidden beneath James’s prose. Keeping readers in close contact with its own surfaces, the novel prompts an experiential practice that mirrors Lewis Lambert Strether’s curious, attentive approach to his material surroundings. Strether’s inquisitive engagement, ardent yet suspended, proves to be the novel’s antidote to Chad Newsome’s acquisitive impulses. The surprising minimalism of James’s elaborate style defies a ruthless system
of exchange by elaborating nothing of value. In considering how this prose might be “minimal,” I suggest that the often irritating texture of James’s style might reflect an ultimately political reticence towards representation.

II. Formalism and Impoverishment

It may seem especially contrarian to draw out the modes and styles of impoverishment in *The Ambassadors*, a novel intent on the pleasurable richness of experience. This richness is, after all, the hallmark of Lewis Lambert Strether’s encounter with Paris. Strether has been sent to Europe as the envoy of his presumptive fiancée, Mrs. Newsome, the formidable widow of a wealthy industrialist. Strether’s mission is to extract the young Chad Newsome, Mrs. Newsome’s son and heir, from the improper liaison all suspect him of having in Paris. But as soon as Strether sets foot on the other side of the Atlantic (the moment with which the novel opens), he undergoes a change. He finds himself relishing his immersion in a place so entirely other from his native Woollett, Massachusetts.

Despite the powerful affective tug of cosmopolitan experience, however, *The Ambassadors* is in other ways distinctly economical. The novel is sparing, for instance, in its manipulation of point of view. The narration closely adheres to Strether’s thoughts and impressions. James carefully molds free indirect style such that even passages of external focalization shade ambiguously into Strether’s thoughts. The narration can thus be thought of as economical in a perspectival sense; however, I intend to invoke the word’s financial implications, as well. The Newsome’s wealth and unnamed industry that produced it serve as a presence throughout the novel not unlike the specter of Mrs.
Newsome herself. Meanwhile, the sensual rewards of the material world—from the streets of the city of Paris to the miscellany of Maria Gostrey’s trinket-filled drawing room—play an indefinite but insistent role in Strether’s absorption. Then there is the confounding act of renunciation with which The Ambassadors ends, wherein Strether surrenders Paris and Maria Gostrey, too. Strether’s refusal to embrace a future in Paris has puzzled critics and readers since the novel appeared, marking Strether’s apparent failure to “live,” as he entreats Little Bilham at a pivotal moment in the novel. It is not just the “copious emptiness” of style that has irritated readers, then, but what is seen as the ascetic, the miserly, and the prudish in James. If there are works of literature that seem generous in their difficulty—Ulysses comes to mind—The Ambassadors is not one of them, replacing as it does the satisfactions of “yes” with refusal and decline.

James’s contemporaries often objected to the imbalance between the investment of time and concentration required to read his novels and the perceived reward in content. A review in the Chicago Tribune, entitled “James’ The Ambassadors: Four Hundred Large Pages in Which Little Happens,” predictably takes James to task for a great deal of “circumlocution” and “elaborate mistiness,” calling even his facts “immaterial” (13). Here, it is not just the length that vexes the reviewer, but the lack of corresponding plot and detail. Another review similarly objects to the inflation of slim material, chastising James for the “undue dilatoriness” produced by “dropping in” adverbs, parentheticals, “and words between commas to qualify every part of the sentence to the quality of the whole” (Times Literary Supplement 296). James’s good friend, Edith Wharton, was only a little less harsh. She calls James occasionally “unintelligible” due to the subordination of plot and character to “James’s technical theories and experiments, by which Wharton
meant his prose style (Gard 342, 344). These invectives share a kind of overblown horror at the sheer volume of the late novels, which is paradoxically implicated in their alleged insubstantiality. In other words, each criticism is invested in the problem posed by the surface of the text in relation to its depth. In casting the form of James’s prose as just so many “technical theories and experiments,” Wharton seems to be claiming that the style itself is arbitrary, contrived, superficial. And she was defending James, as if his prose simply compromised the otherwise solid and substantial content of his narratives.

William James likewise wanted nothing more than “absolute straightness in the style” of Henry’s writing. He described his brother’s “manner of execution” in terms quite evocative of minimalism:

...to avoid naming [a thing] straight, but by dint of breathing and sighing all round and round it, to arouse in the reader who may have had a similar perception already (Heaven help him if he hasn’t!) the illusion of a solid object, made (like the ‘ghost’ at the Polytechnic) wholly out of impalpable materials, air, and the prismatic interferences of light, ingeniously focused upon mirrors upon empty space. But you do it, that’s the queerness! And the complication of innuendo and associative reference on the enormous scale to which you give way to it does so build out the matter for the reader that the result is to solidify, by the mere bulk of the process, the like perception from which he has to start. As air, by dint of its volume, will weigh a corporeal body; so his own poor little initial perception, swathed in this gigantic envelopment of suggestive atmosphere, grows like a germ into something vastly bigger and more substantial. ...19 out of 20 readers grow
intolerant. The method seems perverse: ‘Say it out, for God’s say,’ they cry, ‘and have done with it.’ (qtd. in Poirier, “Vagueness” 244)⁴

Here, William emphasizes the lack at the center of Henry’s text. The “solid object” isn’t merely obscured; it’s actually an “illusion.” The “ingenious” contraption William imagines has no content within itself: the reader imports all the potential material, which is then processed in the empty space of the fiction. This invective assumes, of course, that it is the proper province of fiction to produce something more substantial than “the illusion of a solid object”—that there is, in other words, content proper to the novel form.

In “The Art of Fiction” (1884), Henry James obliquely responds to the content-oriented definition of the novel that fuels the criticisms above. He derisively characterizes this content as “happy endings, sympathetic characters, and an objective tone” (379). He counters that “certain traditions on the subject [of the novel], applied a priori, have already had much to answer for,” since “the good health of an art which undertakes so immediately to reproduce life must demand that it be perfectly free.” Having cleared away all content prerequisites, he then arrives at a kind of negative definition: “The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting. That general responsibility rests upon it, but it is the only one I can think of” (380).

James was obviously keen to replace the specific content associated with “happy endings, sympathetic characters, and an objective tone”; for one thing, his novels duly resist the satisfying closure of traditional marriage plots. But this statement strives to do something much more radical, too, ostensibly purging the novel of all necessary content. As Sianne Ngai has written, “interesting” as a category “might be described as an
aesthetic without content” (120), marking instead a perception of relative difference or deviation. (Ngai notes the odd similarity between James’s formulation for the novel and minimalist sculptor Donald Judd’s famous assertion that “a work needs only to be interesting.”) To create something merely interesting is to decline the obligation to focus on beautiful subjects or to make something happen. Interesting art also resists the doctrine of art’s usefulness, since it produces neither pleasure nor edification.

“The Art of Fiction” also puts the novel form through a series of expansions and contractions, dilutions and distillations. James mocks the suggestion that “a novel is a novel, as a pudding is a pudding, and our only business could be to swallow it” (376). He favors other comparisons: the novel to a painting, or to “a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism” (384). These share an irreducible quality, but his other examples do not. He writes that the “story” or germinating idea might be extricable from the whole. “The story and the novel, the idea and the form, are the needle and thread, and I never heard of a guild of tailors who recommend the use of the thread without the needle or the needle without the thread” (389). In the effort to describe the novel without specific content, form emerges as either indistinguishably melded to content (as in the organic metaphor) or as instrumental (like the needle). But matters are even more complicated than that, for James also wonders whether the elements that make up a novel might not be folded into each other, reducible one to the other: “What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? What is either a picture or a novel that is not of character? What else do we seek in it and find in it?” (385). What else, indeed? These questions ring somewhat uneasily, not only because many readers may in fact seek “happy endings, sympathetic
characters, and an objective tone,” but because they point to a radically reduced vision of
the novel as *nothing more than character*. Beckett himself would come to a similar
conclusion decades later, endeavoring to shrink the novel to character’s less exalted
residue: a meager voice.

To be clear, this is not to say a James novel is just like a Beckett novel. And
though “The Art of Fiction” in a sense defines the novel by its minimal conditions, the
essay is certainly no minimalist manifesto. After all, James calls for “solidity” and an
“illusion of life” in fiction (383), affirming “[t]here must assuredly be something to treat”
(389). Yet there are inklings, here, that the protocols of what would be literary
minimalism shaped James’s understanding of the novel form. “The Art of Fiction”
underscores the importance of aesthetic economy for James: nothing extraneous to
character is to be admitted into the composition. A push-pull becomes evident in this
formulation and in his earlier vacillations between holistic and partial accounts of the
novel form. The novel is *just character* and *merely interesting*. Yet what could be more
capacious and absorbing than character?

It’s clear, then, that James has not defined literary art in strictly formal terms.
Nonetheless, “The Art of Fiction” evinces an effort to identify and to excise the
inessential content of the novel. It becomes apparent that a process of paring down is as
central to James’s compositional practice as any building up. A certain aesthetic idealism
(represented by “happy endings” and “sympathetic characters”) is the first thing to go.
Thus the formalism propounded in “The Art of Fiction” goes hand-in-hand with a nascent
move away from beauty as a moral imperative. This is not to say that James has forgotten
the so-called “morality of the novel,” a subject to which he returns:
I have left the question of the morality of the novel till the last, and at the last I find I have used up my space. It is a question surrounded with difficulties, as witness the very first that meets us, in the form of a definite question, on the threshold. Vagueness, in such a discussion, is fatal, and what is the meaning of your morality and the conscious moral purpose? Will you not define your terms and explain how (a novel being a picture) a picture can be either moral or immoral? You wish to paint a moral picture or carve a moral statue: will you not tell us how you would set about it? We are discussing the Art of Fiction; questions of art are questions (in the widest sense) of execution; questions of morality are quite another affair, and will you not let us see how it is that you find it so easy to mix them up? (391-392)

The word “question” and its plural appear six times in this passage of six sentences, four of which are themselves questions. These questions crop up just as James expresses an anxiety about “fatal” vagueness, yet they do not clarify matters in the least. It’s difficult even to discern to whom they belong and, likewise, to whom they are addressed. In the guise of facing “the question of the morality of the novel,” then, James actually evades it. The heap of questions that remain may indicate the corner he has painted himself into, unwilling to relinquish the moral project of the novel, but unable to see a way forward for the novel as both an autonomous, formal entity, and one capable of representing moral problems. At stake in James’s criticism and that of his contemporaries is, at bottom, the simple question of what the novel is—even more so, what it should be. Relinquishing its social function, the novel risks making itself hermetic, irrelevant; relinquishing its autonomy, it makes itself merely a paltry accessory to real relations between living
human beings. James’s turn to questioning in the face of this insoluble dilemma is telling: in *The Ambassadors*, questioning serves as a technique for simulating suspended, inconclusive engagement.

III. Novelistic Inquisitiveness

Although “The Art of Fiction” predates *The Ambassadors* by almost twenty years, the questions of the earlier essay animate the later novel. In fact, these questions have acquired a new urgency in *The Ambassadors*, as it considers how advertising stands to shift the role of art in society. In response, James makes a subdued claim for what the novel should be: a tentative performance, contingent and uncertain, emphasizing “vulnerability, critique, experiment, risk, and revision” (Posnock 81), with no especially privileged access to truth or meaning. In fact, James’s novels frequently “dramatize,” as Bersani puts it, “the nostalgia for an enslaving truth which would rescue us from the strenuous responsibilities of inventive freedom” (*Future* 133). *The Ambassadors* embraces investigation, rather than representation, as the novel’s proper sphere. Through style, it probes the forms of social interaction, placing the highest value on experience for its own sake. The novel ostensibly suggests a parallel between the way we encounter art—perhaps especially literature, since it is linguistic—and the way we encounter other people. To insist on mining the former for meaning and significance is analogous in the realm of social relations to appropriation of otherness for one’s own uses. Instead, *The Ambassadors* valorizes Strether’s inquisitive engagement, ardent yet suspended, over the acquisitive fervor that a Chad Newsome represents.
And *The Ambassadors* itself is as inquisitive as its protagonist. The novel begins: “Strether’s first question.” What follows is, appropriately enough, a novel of many questions. A rudimentary quantitative examination of *The Ambassadors* bears this out: it employs direct questions, specifically in narration, with greater frequency than his other novels. A novel of approximately 157,405 words, *The Ambassadors* includes roughly four-hundred question marks in narration. This is more than either of the novels written around the same time. *The Wings of the Dove* has fewer question marks overall (only 704, compared to 1328 in *The Ambassadors*) and less than two-hundred and fifty in narration. *The Golden Bowl* has almost exactly the same number of question marks as *The Ambassadors*, but with a larger proportion in dialogue (roughly one thousand). The novel is also significantly longer, at more than 200,000 words. This analysis is, of course, provisional, and it can do nothing to substantiate my sense that *The Ambassadors* also uses indirect questions with much greater frequency than the other late novels. *The Ambassadors* even invokes questions without stating them, as in its first line. Still, the numbers corroborate what is already implicit in the first sentence: the novel’s special valuing of questions and the practice of questioning, especially as that practice is embodied in Lewis Lambert Strether.

Given Strether’s acuity, he shows a remarkable willingness to suspend judgment. In Ross Posnock’s account, suspension is indeed integral to Jamesian curiosity, “a ‘double consciousness’ of the sort [James] ascribes to Strether in the opening pages of *The Ambassadors*: ‘There was a detachment in his zeal and a curiosity in his indifference’” (51). This suspension emerges from an experience of nonidentity, Posnock implies: there is “an affinity between curiosity and…nonidentity and otherness.” “Since
curiosity entwines self with other, one result is a ‘good deal of speculative tension’ that
James will consistently cultivate” (20-21). I think it’s safe to say, for instance, that the
reader knows from the outset that Chad and Marie de Vionnet are having an affair; thus,
Strether’s inclination to believe his friend, Little Bilham, when the latter insists that theirs
is a “virtuous attachment” seems to show exceptional forbearance. That he is quite wrong
to believe in the virtuousness of the relationship is part of the point. Strether’s
commitment to openness and inquisitiveness is not heroic; in the end, this commitment is
profoundly useless, earning him nothing. To be sure, when the novel sets Strether’s
inquisitiveness beside Chad’s odiously industrious acquisitiveness, Strether comes out
better in the comparison; however, Strether himself hardly comes out better. Chad is,
finally, wealthy, youthful, carefree. In the end, Strether loses the financial stability of
Mrs. Newsome’s partnership and declines to seize Paris (and Maria Gostrey) for himself.
Yet Strether’s forbearance represents a salutary renunciation of ego, too, and an openness
to experiences of otherness.

In *The Ambassadors*, questions express both the futility and ethical value of
curiosity: they often serve as a method for reproducing the frustration of meaning as a
central feature of entanglement with otherness. This aspect of *The Ambassadors* makes
use of the minimalism already inherent in the interrogative as a formal construction.
Questions reverse the status of content, from information to its lack. They are, in a sense,
empty: even if they are fully articulated, they draw attention to something as yet
unknown or unsaid. Their relative resistance to interpretation proceeds from this
emptiness. We can ask why a character asks a question or why s/he asks it in a certain
way, but any interpretive effort exerted in regards to a question will always encounter,
first, the relative uncertainty of its material. It’s not that questions short-circuit interpretive methods entirely, but that they underline the ostensibly subjective nature of all content by revealing how knowledge and information are shaped by implicit or explicit questions. (What we know, that is, has been constituted by what we know to ask and how we go about asking it.) Questions also tend to be brief: adding too much detail, in too many clauses, tends to dilute a question’s interrogative force. They therefore require a specific kind of conceptual work on the part of the questioner, who must distill an issue or parse it.

James also demonstrates how problematic it is to ignore what might be called the performance of a question: how it is asked, by whom, of whom, in what psychological or interpersonal frame. In the barest sense, questions index desire, and thus promise to remain always at least partially unfulfilled. To ask a question is to enter into relation: to approach an issue dialogically, rather than within the self. Questions therefore reveal not only a desire to know (something), but a desire to be known by the other. A question is not, for James, merely a tool for gathering information; rather, it is a plunge into the vulnerability of desire and uncertainty at their most unresolvable. After all, questions can be evasive (as answering a question with a question tends to be).

The notion of a question as inherently risky as well as fundamentally open is captured in the peculiar formal suspension of questions in free indirect discourse. If a question is direct and does not refer to the focalized character, it can “belong” to the character whose consciousness it records, the narrator, and the reader equally. In this sense, free indirect discursive questions occupy a unique place in third-person narrative. Whereas declarative sentences express the certainty possessed only by an individual
subject, questions are open to collective encounter. Indeed, questions tend to mimic: they restate assumptions or examples because there is no other way to quantify what remains unknown. Everyday conversation is filled with mirroring questions. Asking questions allows us to demonstrate our empathetic abilities: they show how well we have understood the contours of our interlocutors’ lives and, even more, how precisely we can mirror their emotions and comportment.

Another way of putting this is simply to say that questions are essentially social. This applies even to those we pose to ourselves. The construction “I ask myself” makes this clear: questions place one in a relation to oneself as an other. Since they bring us into a relation with otherness, then, questions make us vulnerable; they constitute a plunge into contradiction and chaos; they open us to rejection, invalidation, thwarted desire. A direct question in free indirect discourse draws a reader into a potentially vulnerable relation—a kind of identification—with a character and a narrator. I argue in this chapter that, through the practice of questioning, a novel can model suspended, non-acquisitive sociability: relation without appropriation.

So, there is a case to be made that the question is in some sense formally minimal already. One might say, alternately, that asking questions is a way of using language minimally—with little assertion, information, or claim (to usefulness, relevance, authority, et cetera). In The Ambassadors, these properties of the question are amplified. Not only do they function to undermine the accretion of certainty, but they appear in a context that already favors vague and suspended constructions. In his famous explication of the first paragraph of the novel, Ian Watt observes of the passage as a whole that it maintains a significant level of abstraction, negation, and strategic delay. Watt argues that
“the notorious idiosyncrasies of Jamesian prose” (134) emerge from James’s attempt to balance, in suspension, three points of view: that of the character, the narrator, and the reader. “One reason for the special demand James’s fictional prose makes on our attention is surely that there are always at least three levels of development—all of them subjective: the characters’ awareness of events, the narrator’s seeing of them; and our own trailing perception of the relation between these two” (124). He also affirms the importance questions play in the passage: “James, we saw, carefully arranged to make ‘Strether’s first question’, the first three words; and, of course, throughout the novel, Strether is to go on asking questions—and getting increasingly dusty answers. This, it may be added, is stressed by the apparent aposiopesis: for a ‘first’ question when no second is mentioned, is surely an intimation that more are—in a way unknown to us or to Strether—to come” (132). Watt implies that the other elements he isolates—“a preference for non-transitive verbs; many abstract nouns; much use of ‘that’; a certain amount of elegant variation to avoid piling up personal pronouns and adjectives such as ‘he’, ‘his’ and ‘him’; and the presence of a great many negatives and near-negatives” (122)—work in tandem with the paragraph’s emphasis on questioning to produce an extraordinarily suspended and uncertain swath of text. I have suggested, above, that questioning positions the character, narrator, and reader in a uniquely suspended relation to one another, too. Similarly, Watt notes that the first sentence of The Ambassadors exploits the undecided nature of the “question” that is its subject:

[M]aking the subject of the sentence ‘question’ rather than ‘he’, has the effect of subordinating the particular actor, and therefore the particular act, to a much more general perspective: mental rather than physical, and subjective rather than
objective; ‘question’ is a word which involves analysis of both a physical event into terms of meaning and intention: it involves, in fact, both Strether’s mind and the narrator’s. (123)

In this analysis, the first paragraph of the novel exhibits a particular kind of suspension generated at least in part by its minimal qualities: it consists largely of uncertain, vague, or negated content.

Watt’s description of the compositional logic of the passage begins to suggest the way in which it generates a sheer surface, from which many interpretations seem to be deflected. The apparent priority of the surface of the prose is evident in a single sentence from the first paragraph:

The principle I have just mentioned as operating had been, with the most newly disembarked of the two men, wholly instinctive—the fruit of a sharp sense that, delightful as it would be to find himself looking, after so much separation, into his comrade’s face, his business would be a trifle bungled should he simply arrange for his countenance to present itself to the nearing steamer as the first ‘note’ of Europe. (The Ambassadors 21)

In this sentence, as in James’s prose generally, the minute qualifications and subordinate clauses evoke the processes of linguistic specification while in fact producing new ambiguities. The complex predicate here modifies the subject (the internal “principle”) by describing it: the first part of the sentence establishes that it is “instinctive,” while the remainder after the dash functions structurally as a further explanation of what “instinctive” means in this case. That is, one can read this sentence as an elaborate clarification of a function in Strether’s consciousness and, at the same time, a free
indirect discursive illustration of that function. The structure of the sentence, with its several dependent clauses, might suggest layers of increasing specificity and precision in the discussion of this “principle.” Yet the sentence doesn’t fulfill its promise to clarify or describe. The first modifying phrase in the sentence—“with the most newly disembarked of the men”—refers to Strether, but the circumlocution renders that reference tenuous. Though the sentence deals with a fact of Strether’s internal life, this clause curiously distances the reader from his mind. It places Strether according to external rather than internal phenomena: the clause informs us of his time and place relative to Waymarsh. Thus, it also locates him between the crucial poles of the novel: America and Europe, Woollett and Paris, “the long and fateful tradition of transatlantic disembarkations in general,” as Watt puts it (128). The second half of the sentence further confuses the situation with a series of ambiguous pronouns and the introduction of obscure new information: the duration of their separation, Strether’s obscure “business,” and the awkwardly colloquial “‘note’” of Europe.

The form of the sentence disperses rather than consolidates its material; instead of becoming more precise about the “principle,” the sentence continues along the track of Strether’s thinking. James’s subtle manipulation of free indirect discourse allows the sentence to examine an aspect of Strether’s internal life, even while representing the continued movement of it. The passage remains suspended between distance and closeness; Strether is the subject and object of attention. The form of the sentence evokes descriptive linguistic structures of increasing specificity, but instead of explaining its subject, the sentence moves horizontally towards contiguous material. “One of the strangest effects of James’s late style,” David Kurnick writes,
…is the way in which its feats of grammatical subordination achieve the effect of a purely lateral, or additive, syntax. Rhetoricians note that an excess of hypotaxis has the effect of parataxis, so that on our way through a rigorously subordinated sentence, we end up perceiving less the intricately graded relation among clauses than the mere fact of their co-presence, in a defeat of the sentence’s temporal axis by a spatial one… (107)

Thus, there is a disjunction between what James’s distinctively hypotactic style promises to do and what it does. Depending, perhaps, on the speed at which they’re read, James’s sentences toggle between the impression of hierarchical explanation and that of a less differentiated sequence.

James’s sentences acquire their capacity for hovering in the investigative mode without reaching closure through this effect. Direct questions often serve a similar function at the paragraph level in *The Ambassadors*. To see how this could be true, let us look, first, at Strether’s disorienting inauguration into Parisian society in the mysterious garden of the painter, Gloriani. This is a scene that has special significance for James, who suggests in his Preface that the whole novel grew from a real-life telling of it (reputedly about his friend, William Dean Howells). James writes that the moment prompts in Strether a “terrible question”: “Would there yet perhaps be time for reparation?—reparation, that is, for the injury done his character; for the affront, he is quite ready to say, so stupidly put upon it and in which he has even himself had so clumsy a hand?” (2). At the time of the novel, Strether is in his mid-fifties. Briefly, on his arrival in Paris, he recalls a long ago visit with a young wife, now deceased, with whom he had a son, who died shortly after his mother. The promise of that visit, in his youth,
has since been muffled by the sadness and monotony of the intervening years; in Paris, Strether realizes he has not lived sufficiently. This is the “reparation” to which James refers: Strether’s new engagement in living. Strether “wakes up to it”—the question of reparation—in an “old Paris garden,” a significant setting for James, “for in that token were sealed up values infinitely precious” (3).

The garden (near St.-Germain-des-Prés on the Left Bank) and the chapter (Book Fifth, Chapter 1) to which the Preface refers are heady with “sealed up values.” The scene is lush and strange. Arriving guests appear as if produced by the setting itself: “His fellow guests were multiplying, and these things, their liberty, intensity, their variety, their conditions at large, were in fusion in the admirable medium of the scene.” James produces a dense description, evoking not only a verdant image of the present, but also the European gothic presence of history:

It was in the garden, a spacious cherished remnant, out of which a dozen persons had already passed, that Chad's host presently met them; while the tall bird-haunted trees, all of a twitter with the spring and the weather, and high party-walls, on the other side of which grave hôtels stood off for privacy, spoke of survival, transmission, association, a strong indifferent persistent odor. …Strether had presently the sense of a great convent, a convent of missions, famous for he scarce knew what, a nursery of young priests, of scattered shade, of straight alleys and chapel-bells, that spread its mass in one quarter; he had the sense of names in the air, of ghosts at the windows, of signs and tokens, a whole range of expression, all about him, too thick for prompt discrimination.
This assault of images became for a moment, in the address of the distinguished sculptor, almost formidable. (161)

This passage represents everything that isn’t minimal about James’s writing: the profusion of “expression,” Strether’s absorption and the narrator’s, the evocation of the richness of a present moment redolent with history. James constructs a sense of unusual duration and symbolism, here: “fame” Strether cannot comprehend, ghosts, obscure names, signs, tokens. The place itself prompts Strether—and, in this moment, narration closely knit to his consciousness—to imagine lavishly. Strether doesn’t merely see it, in other words: he perceives and creates it at once—a “process of vision” that resembles Jamesian novel-making. The first moments in Gloriani’s garden are a revelation. “Strether, in contact with that element as he had never yet so intimately been, had the consciousness of opening to it, for the happy instant, all the windows of his mind” (161).

The promise of the passage arguably remains unfulfilled, however. What rushes in the open windows of Strether’s mind is insight or understanding, per se, but the rawness of experience. This is also an excellent example of James at his most paratactic. Although the passage is descriptively and linguistically dense—“too thick for prompt discrimination,” as the text itself puts it—and although it involves a novelistic history for the setting, it remains difficult to characterize the significance of this moment. In this respect, the experience is typical: much of Strether’s rapturous wandering about Paris seems to be digressive, leisurely, aimless, inconsequential.

The scene ends up being emotionally and intellectually intense, but ultimately remains opaque. Strether is nearly overcome by perceptions. “He had seen moreover an immensity,” James writes just before Strether’s important speech to Bilham (175). The
“immensity” of the moment in which Strether comes face to face with the artist himself causes a shift in the tense of the narration. We learn of how Strether will come to reflect on the situation later, while the moment itself remains unrepresented, except in memory:

He was to remember again repeatedly the medal-like Italian face, in which every line was an artist’s own, in which time told only as tone and consecration; and he was to recall in especial, as the penetrating radiance, as the communication of the illustrious spirit itself, the manner in which, while they stood briefly, in welcome and response, face to face, he was held by the sculptor’s eyes. He wasn’t soon to forget them, was to think of them, all unconscious, unintending, preoccupied though they were, as the source of the deepest intellectual sounding to which he had ever been exposed. He was in fact quite to cherish his vision of it, to play with it in idle hours; only speaking of it to no one and quite aware he couldn’t have spoken without appearing to talk nonsense. (162)

Thus, Strether’s meeting with Gloriani comes to be known only in retrospect. We learn nothing of the moment as it happens: the words they exchange and their habits or manners go unreported. The artist’s gaze alone offers a “deep intellectual sounding.” Even from a temporal remove, Strether’s reflections on the incident lack clarity. He “cherishes” his vision, but it is a subject of fantasy, “nonsense” not fit for discussion. He is riveted by the encounter, in other words, but not enlightened by it.

This strange meeting directly gives way to a series of questions. Immediately after the passage I have quoted above, Strether questions his memory of it:

…appearing to talk nonsense. Was what it had told him or what it had asked him the greater of the mysteries? Was it the most special flare, unequalled, supreme,
of the aesthetic torch, lighting the wondrous world for ever, or was it above all the long straight shaft sunk by a personal acuteness that life had seasoned to steel?

(162).

The first of these questions might almost be said to contain a set of nested questions. “What it had told him” and “what it asked him” remain “mysteries”; “it” seems to be, but is not definitely, Gloriani’s gaze; and the precise communication of this look—what it “told” or “asked”—is obscure. This last implies yet another question. In light of the Preface, it seems to point to the question James locates at the center of the novel: “Would there yet perhaps be time for reparation?” The questions are themselves full of vague imagery and elusive referents. They can hardly be said to work towards clarification; instead, they seem to record the failure of insight that marks Strether’s experience of this moment. He cannot interpret it.

Like many questions in The Ambassadors, this pair of questions appears around the middle or towards the end of a paragraph. They arise from the examination taken up in the paragraph: in this case, the retrospective consideration of Strether’s introduction to Gloriani, an analysis that begins, awkwardly, with an “assault of images.” In fact, the questions themselves seem to indicate a crisis—a moment at which, in the progress of the paragraph, no more can be gleaned of the subject at hand. The extent to which Strether can know the experience has reached its limit: he can “cherish” his vision, but not speak it. The questions themselves strike one as the sort of “idle play” Strether makes of the vision later, and they do seem to track Strether’s thoughts. If this is so, as “idle play” they represent a stalled process of introspection. Here, Strether finds himself beyond interpretation, and the narrator and the reader cannot go much further. I would argue that
this is precisely because this interruption of insight occurs in the form of a question, which remains radically open and (in the case of the second question, which has no direct reference to Strether) suspended between character, narrator, and reader. Another way to put this: the question gives us the form of the experience, as an encounter, without the content. We learn nothing of what passes between the two men; however, the questions themselves capture the extent to which Strether is caught up in whatever it is.

There is absolutely no doubt that the moment that passes as Strether stands under Gloriani’s gaze amounts to one of the most pivotal in the novel. It leads directly to his confrontation with his own destiny. It’s remarkable, then, how distanced a perspective the narration maintains. The scene itself remains a blank that gives way to a proliferation of questions. The passage reflects on its interrogative turn, as Strether’s vision obscurely “asks” something of him. These paragraphs thus trace a link between the resistance of experience to interpretation and the development of a questioning pose. Finding this meeting uninterpretable, Strether is left with the something more valuable: a fresh curiosity about his own life. Indeed, it seems that the opacity of the experience bestows on it a distinctly aesthetic cast. The encounter with Gloriani becomes an aesthetic experience—a “special flare, unequalled, supreme, of the aesthetic torch”—by virtue of its singularity, which is to say, its unassimilable difference from Strether’s existing categories and concepts.

The portrayal of this moment is, of course, part of a broader aestheticization of experience in *The Ambassadors*. But it is not accomplished through an appeal to the shared richness of art and life, as it often is in James; here, everyday experience becomes aesthetic when it resists our assimilation into a sense of self, place, community, et cetera.
Thus, James finds a kind of poverty underlying this and other intense experiences in the novel, despite their vivid surface density. This is not to say that we ought to conclude that the experience is meaningless in some existential sense, but it is, I think, uninterpretable. Aestheticized, the moment resists paraphrase. In this way, James’s representation (or non-representation) of the encounter reflects a commitment to sustained openness and inquisitiveness—more experience, rather than more knowledge about experience or about the self having the experience. So Strether recommends to Bilham not the content of life, but bare experience, its form: “Live all you can; it’s a mistake not to. It doesn’t so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life” (176). “[Strether] yearns to be wholly at one with the event, any event, ‘the thing of the moment’” Myra Jehlen writes, “he seems to have decided that knowledge requires immersion, to know a thing whole one has to be whole in the knowing. He asks Maria to teach him the form of living more than its content” (79).

As I’ve suggested above, there are numerous instances like this one in The Ambassadors, where questions mark the breakdown of interpretive processes in the face of a particularly aestheticized experience. One such question comes to Strether in Book Eleventh, Chapter 4, a chapter much-discussed by critics for its peculiar staging of the novel’s climax. “What he saw was exactly the right thing,” it ironically begins—ironically because, in this chapter, Strether has the truth abruptly thrust before him: Chad and Marie de Vionnet taking an intimate day in the country. That Strether should find himself in their way is due, oddly enough, to his ruminations on French landscape painting, particularly “a little Lambinet” he wishes he’d bought. In Chapter 3, we learn that Strether “had gone forth under the impulse—artless enough, no doubt—to give the
whole of one of [his days] to that French ruralism…into which he had hitherto looked only through the oblong window of the picture-frame” (410). The aside—“artless enough”—looks passingly witty in this context, since the sentence confirms that his “impulse” was partly motivated by literal art. In retrospect, however, it appears positively ironic: the next chapter reveals the extent of Strether’s artlessness against the subterfuge of Chad and Marie de Vionnet.

Thus, when Strether sees “exactly the right thing,”—a man and woman rowing down the river on a picturesque day in the country—the rightness of this image refers to its pictorial quality, its similarity to a painterly subject. “[The approaching boat is exactly the right thing in the same way] the landscape and the day have been exactly right; or almost, since he now sees it was awaiting the culmination of the man and woman just drifting in. In completing the formal arrangement, they seem to bring an aesthetic ratification to Strether’s truth,” Myra Jehlen writes (86). Its specifically aesthetic rightness is curiously upheld and overturned by the dawning knowledge that he has spent his time in Paris denying what is now before his eyes. On the one hand, the idyll has been uncomfortably tinged by knowledge (which as Jehlen points out “tends to destroy idyls” in Western literature). On the other hand, Marie de Vionnet labors to heighten the superficial rightness of the scene by smoothing over its social awkwardness (a willingness to “keep up appearances” for which Strether is ultimately grateful).

Marie’s “performance” (as Strether thinks of it) again takes place in the oddly distanced retrospective tense that James seems to reserve for intense experiences in The Ambassadors. Again, a set of questions appears in a long meditation introduced by the striking tense of “Strether was to remember afterwards.” Added to this layer of temporal
distance is another: “…indeed he was to remember further still, in subsequent meditation, many things that, as it were, fitted together” (421). The questions materialize in the course of his subsequent reflections:

He was rather glad, none the less, that they had in point of fact not parted at the Cheval Blanc, that he hadn’t been reduced to giving them his blessing for an idyllic retreat down the river. He had had in the actual case to make believe more than he liked, but this was nothing, it struck him, to what the other event would have required. Could he, literally, quite have faced the other event? Would he have been capable of making the best of it with them? (425)

Even from a remove, the counterfactual retains a kind of immensity; Strether still wonders if he could “literally, quite have faced the other event.” This question is strange, its “literally” apparently misplaced. It likely refers to the possibility of a social failure, but it might also suggest a literal “facing” of the event—literally perceiving it. Of course, Strether has resisted seeing “it” in the past. Having seen, he is struck by the specter of complicity. Indeed, as the paragraph continues, he feels keenly his involvement in the making of a falsehood:

It was all very well for him to feel the pity of its being so much like lying; he almost blushed, in the dark, for the way he had dressed the possibility in vagueness, as a little girl might have dressed her doll. He had made them—and by no fault of their own—momentarily pull it for him, the possibility, out of this vagueness; and must he therefore take it now as they had had simply, with whatever thin attenuations, to give it to him? The very question, it may be added, made him feel lonely and cold. (425)
Strether harshly figures his participation—the “dressing [of] the possibility in vagueness”—as a naïve and inept aestheticizing of the situation, not so unlike the “idle play” he makes of his meeting with Gloriani. He rather savagely indicts himself for this. The question, again, marks a crisis. Strether is overwhelmed by the circumstances of his discovery. He is embarrassed enough by his innocence to blush in the dark. As a result, the question snags not on the fact of the affair itself, on its content or implications, but on Strether’s experience of it, as it is laid bare before him. This is a moment in which no more questions can be asked; Strether recognizes that he will “take it now” with its “thin attenuations.” He has lost the possibility of having the truth clad any other way. At the same time, it is Strether specifically, and not the narrator, who “blushes” for having “dressed the possibility in vagueness.” A reader, on the other hand, might recognize something admirable in Strether’s willingness to rest in vagueness. It is through this willingness, after all, that he gives himself the time and space to accrue other experiences. Chief among the virtues of this self-education is his heightened appreciation for the aesthetic facet of everyday life, uncoupled from instrumental uses. Unfortunately, just as James’s formal vision for the novel founders on the “question of the morality of novel,” so too does Strether’s free and idle absorption with the sheer painterly perfection of the day collide with the almost-forgotten morality plot of The Ambassadors.

III. Blank Objects

So far, I have documented several minimal aspects of The Ambassadors, in particular its retreat from the novel’s meaning-making function. Through style, James labors to make his writing as suspended, vague, and inconclusive as possible; despite its
expansiveness, James’s style is sometimes radically unproductive. Meanwhile, paragraphs that seem to build towards insight and significance often turn aside in the form of the interrogative. However, in *The Ambassadors*, there are blanks and silences more literal than the evasions and renunciations of style. Two *objects* go unnamed in the novel: the item purchased by dyspeptic Connecticut lawyer, Waymarsh, before the novel proceeds to Paris and, of course, the ubiquitous little household article manufactured by the Newsome family. Since the novel’s publication, much ink has been spilled over the latter of these two: E. M. Forster speculated about the object’s nature in *Aspects of the Novel*, and there was even as *Slate* article proclaiming it a toothpick in 2007. The former object, meanwhile, has been handily ignored. Yet these two objects appear—or rather fail to appear—within the space of twenty pages; moreover, the novel highlights these failures, surrounding the mystery of each object with the curiosity of the characters and, by implication, readers.

At the opening of the novel, the reader learns very little about why Strether has come to Europe. James imparts information about the primary plot at a trickle; the first chapters of the novel allow Strether to indulge other thoughts, with the reader following his sense of freedom. In Book I, Strether meets Maria Gostrey upon disembarking in Chester. Soon, his old friend, Waymarsh, joins them. Book I serves as a kind of prelude to the main business of the novel. The three stroll the streets of Chester, taking in the shops and the sights. It is during their walk that the obstinately silent Waymarsh ducks into a jewelry shop. This scene draws attention to silence as a diegetic and representational strategy—the silences of characters and those of the novel itself. Waymarsh’s “stricken silence” is, for Strether, “charged with audible rumblings” (45).
The narration as Waymarsh makes “a sudden grim dash” to the other side of the street sticks closely to Strether’s point of view as he and Gostrey watch this spectacle together:

This movement was startingly sudden, and his companions at first supposed him to have espied, to be pursuing, the glimpse of an acquaintance. They next made out, however, that an open door had instantly received him, and they then recognized him as engulfed in the establishment of a jeweler, behind whose glittering front he was lost to view. (48)

In the end, Strether and Gostrey never learn the content of the incident or the identity of Waymarsh’s purchase: “He told them nothing, left his absence unexplained, and though they were convinced he had made some extraordinary purchase, they were never to learn its nature” (51).

Again, the unusual tense indicates from a temporal remove that their ignorance on this point will be final. This tense marks a sudden shift in narrative voice, from a closeness to the characters’ speculation in the moment to a distant omniscient rendering of the future. An identical shift frames the novel’s unveiling of its other blank commodity. Having visited the theater together, Strether and Gostrey discuss his involvement with the Newsome family and the ambassadorial task with which Mrs. Newsome has charged him. Gostrey questions Strether about the source of their wealth. Strether names it a “great production…great industry,” but when she asks, “And what is the article produced?” he hedges, calling the item “vulgar.” The “mystery of the production at Woollett” is never revealed. Strether, we are told, “persuaded her to patience” in this instance. Then, abruptly:
But it may even now frankly be mentioned that he in the sequel never was to tell her. He actually never did so, and it moreover oddly occurred that by the law, within her, of the incalculable, her desire for the information dropped and her attitude to the question converted itself into a positive cultivation of ignorance. In ignorance she could humour her fancy, and that proved a useful freedom. She could treat the little nameless object as indeed unnameable… (63-64)

The beginning of this passage (“But it may even now frankly be mentioned”) signals, again, the abrupt interpolation of an omniscient narrator, whose apologetic tone only serves to underline how this insertion of prospective information disrupts the flow of the scene.

The doubling of lost objects in so short a span produces an altogether distinct blankness. They’re not so much vague as assertively unnamed. There’s even something slightly camp about these blanks. First, they’re trivial things, not symbolic at all. (To my knowledge, no one has ever suggested that the Newsomes manufacture flags or crucifixes.) Yet the attention James lavishes on them suggests symbolic weight. In their conspicuousness, they might pass for an unintentionally parodic imitation of James’s usual circumlocutions. The shift in narrative voice that follows each incident of non-naming further reminds us of the layers of artifice involved in this withholding: the omniscient narrator has access to the information which is, in any case, made-up information. In other words, it is an unusually intrusive use of authorial control, to withhold the identity of these objects. Thus, the novel’s most prominent commercial artifacts also happen to be a primary source of unresolved narrative suspension, though lacking entirely in narrative consequence.
Like all blanks, these blanks are simultaneously unyielding to interpretation and, paradoxically, its most fertile site. Richard Salmon offers a Marxian account, writing that “[t]he audible silence which surrounds the source of the Newsome’s wealth is, indeed, symptomatic of the way in which the novel as a whole works in tracing the suppressed connections between the worlds of culture and commerce” (153).

[I]t is this binary structure articulated variously in terms of the oppositions between Paris and Woollett, culture and commerce, surface and depth, which permeates the entire novel…At the same time, James’s strategy of representing the ‘abyss’ between base and superstructure…mimetically re-enacts the illusion of their separation…The Ambassadors…traces the emergence of new economic and cultural practices, in which the old lines separating base and superstructure begin to dissolve. (156)

This reading moves rapidly from James’s “silence” on the source of the Newsomes’ wealth to a demystification of that silence. In the blank commodities of The Ambassadors, extraordinarily abstract and previously obscured economic or psychological realities become quite readily available for interpretation. Blankness itself becomes a kind of plentiful surface—that is, full of meaning, full of signification.

But is the nameless Woollett commodity (or the nameless and ignored Waymarsh purchase) in need of demystification? One of the strange things about these blanks is that James makes their status as commodities abundantly clear. It cannot be, in other words, that these objects go unrepresented and unnamed merely because James feels “embarrassment” about the vulgarity of commerce, for he is direct about their commercial character. Indeed, without further specification, they are just exactly
commodities: the one marked by its production, the other by its exchange. Further, symptomatic readings disregard the obstinate and unyielding qualities of blankness as such. They read over the finality of Strether’s and James’s refusal to name them, ignoring the novel’s ruminations on what it means to let the question hang, unresolved, permanently. For The Ambassadors frankly recommends detached, idle curiosity and, further, that the reader accept these blanks (and all blanks) as a feature of aesthetic experience. In the passage above explaining Maria Gostrey’s “positive cultivation of ignorance,” the “useful freedom” of leaving the thing be—treating “the little nameless object as indeed unnameable”—seems to mark her distinction as both cultured and imaginative. She meets this blank, I would argue, as one ideally meets a work of art.

Yet The Ambassadors’ invitation to speculate about these pieces of trivia, their larger significance and deeper meaning, also reflects its concern with representation’s role in processes of commodification (and, perhaps, vice versa). Writing on the “disappearance” of objects in general in James’s fiction, Bill Brown notes that “the disappearance of the object in advertising might be rethought as advertising’s having learned—or intuited—something about aesthetics, about art: hence the art of advertising. Advertising comes to recognize the priority of the subject over the object, the priority of the imagination” (19). And, in the closing chapters, the novel seems to wonder somewhat explicitly about its participation in an aesthetic economy that includes advertising. During Strether’s last interview with Chad, the younger man raises the possibility, again, of going into advertising for his family’s industry. Advertising, Chad alarmingly avers, is “an art like any other, and infinite like all the arts.” “In the hands,” he adds, “of a master. The right man must take hold. With the right man to work it c’est un monde” (462).
Strether is duly horrified by this ominous pronouncement, even though the possibility of Chad serving this function in his family’s business has been raised before. Strether sees, now, that Chad will use the valuable cultural education Madame de Vionnet has given him in order to sell things. Advertising, it turns out, has haunted The Ambassadors all along. Chad’s idea of advertising as “an art like any other” carries with it a threat to representation and the autonomy of aesthetic production. Meanwhile, his joke “c’est un monde” suggests alongside its idiomatic meaning the reach and scope of advertising. But it is not simply that, as Jennifer Wicke writes, “The Ambassadors probes this rift [between advertising and literature] by battling with advertising, instead of parodically absorbing it” (103). Nor is James’s writing “the commodity form,” as Jean-Christophe Agnew puts it, in which the “density” of a novel like The Golden Bowl is “itself the outcome of a consuming vision’s merciless power to detach not only itself, but its objects: alienating them quite literally from their conventional associations and context and accumulating them as resources, as capital” (204). Agnew is speaking of precisely the stylistic features I’ve been discussing: he casts James as a “strange” “scientist,” “preferring as he did a parsimony of instances and a plenitude of explanations” (206) and describes his style as a “celebrated posture of detachment…icy aloofness and intense scrutiny” (193). However, I want to suggest, here, that James’s engagement with advertising is more vexed than either of these arguments captures.

The threat of advertising has a special potency in The Ambassadors because advertising and the novel traffic in the same aesthetic and representational strategies. The novel can neither simply criticize nor straightforwardly—or even parodically—absorb the
forces of commodification, because, as James was acutely aware, novels cannot disassociate themselves from the marketplace. Thus, Jonathan Freedman has argued that James should be read in light of his association with British aestheticism partly because this conjunction elucidates James’s complex rapport with the literary marketplace and with the very processes of commodification. For Freedman, the British aestheticist movement and James’s “performance within [its] arena” must be understood in light of their ramifications within an “increasingly articulated fin de siècle literary and artistic marketplace in such a way as not merely to confirm the ubiquity of commodity culture, but also so as to accomplish the commodification of ‘culture’ itself.” He notes that one “irony” of this process is that “some of the most crucial of these goods turned out to be artifacts that critiqued commodity culture itself” (xii-xiii). Freedman lucidly exposes the bonds between aestheticism and commodification, as well as the intertwining of aestheticism and advertising.

What we witness is the emergence of a rhetoric that deployed the “cultural” and the “aesthetic” as advertising slogans, as part of naïve but nevertheless effective strategy for advertising commodities that would at once glorify and efface the act of consumption itself by grounding even the most mundane acquisitive choices in the nonmaterial realm of transcendent value designated by the aesthetic. (109)

Aestheticism provides an “imaginative structure” to American advertisers (111). It is not simply that aestheticism has been co-opted, however; rather, the two develop inseparably in this account. Aestheticism’s “intervention in American culture was to train the middle-class reading public to expect its writers and artists to be alienated, self-satisfied, and flamboyant; to expect their discourse to be hermetic, privatized, and self-
referential,” Freedman writes (xxiv-xxv). In other words, aestheticism’s role in popular
culture paved the way for later avant-garde movements (such as modernism), but also
allowed for the commodification of hermetic high-culture. Freedman notes that the
formal techniques I have been defining as “minimalist” both participate in this
progression and, in James, constitute one possible reaction to James’s perception of the
dangers of “the aestheticizing vision”:

If the novel suggests that even the most noble, if naïve, examples of the
aestheticizing vision are fatally flawed, then James’s alternatives are clear: either
he needs to abandon or alter his fictional project entirely, or he needs to find a
way to repurify the aesthetic itself, to demonstrate that perceptual and experiential
responses like intense observation and the aestheticizing vision might prove
redeemable, if not redemptive. And, needless to say, it is the latter path that he
chooses. (71-2)

Freedman’s account helps to clarify the double-bind in which James finds himself, but it
is far from “needless to say” that James chooses “repurification.” Indeed, the nature of
the bind makes purification impossible, as Freedman’s own argument makes clear: the
very idea of autonomy (another word for purity) in art grows out of an historical moment
already embedded in commercial culture. Meanwhile, James’s engagement with
advertising entails both purification and renunciation, only as incomplete, ongoing
processes.

Part of the power of the way The Ambassadors addresses advertising, then, is that
it takes seriously the claim embedded in Chad’s speech: advertising is art. It is an
instrumental art, of course, crafted to manipulate; at the same time, however, it partakes
of the strategies and techniques available to all aesthetic productions. But whereas we think of advertising as a superficial art, and interpretation as the way to demystify its relationship to capital, James’s response to advertising takes the opposite tack. _The Ambassadors_ suggests, instead, that advertising depends on interpretive reading—that is, on the assumption that surface representations recur to significant depths. As such, the novel’s critique of advertising rests in its formal subtraction of such depths: its vagueness, inquisitiveness, and suspension. By refusing to do “more” with style, James offers an alternative to advertising.

Let me unpack this argument a bit. Of the Woollett commodity, Jennifer Wicke writes, “The invisible, if humble and trivial, product stands in need of the auratization, the narrative halo, that only advertisement will be able to provide. It is literally unnamed until Chad can come back and work that alchemy upon it” (104). Wicke’s “alchemy” metaphor has its antecedent in Raymond Williams’s essay, “Advertising: The Magic System” (1980). The notion of advertising as “magic” captures its status as façade. Advertising, according to Williams, conceals social uses in favor of individual consumption, “operat[ing] to preserve the consumption ideal from the criticism inexorably made of it by experience.” “The magic obscures the real sources of general satisfaction because their discovery would involve radical change in the whole common way of life,” he writes (47). The surfaces of advertising must be replete, mesmerizing; the object, meanwhile, first recedes and then disappears. As Williams explains, this disappearance makes perfect sense: the object itself is insufficient as well as beside the point. “It is impossible to look at modern advertising without realising that the material object being sold is never enough,” he says, “This indeed is the crucial cultural quality of
its modern forms” (40). All this often renders advertising nearly indistinguishable from art: “Magic is always an unsuccessful attempt to provide meanings and values, but it is often very difficult to distinguish magic from genuine knowledge and from art” (49). In order to succeed in this didactic function, advertising must obscure its own representational procedures; only by seeming to be unmagical does advertising achieve its magic at all. Another way of putting this is to say that advertising relies on an artificially demystified mode of representation; its sleight-of-hand comprises not only the convincing representation itself, but the secreting away of the representational work itself. This obstruction entails the seamless mimetic illusion by which the commodity not only becomes real to us, but becomes usable, exchangeable, desirable. In a sense, it tells us how to interpret them, thereby assimilating them into a larger system of meaning. Advertising tells a consumer how to do things with commodities, how to exchange them and incorporate them into our lives.

Advertising supplants the commodity’s secret history—that of its production—with a new aura of meaning oriented towards consumption. This secret history is, of course, the target of much interpretation. It’s worth noting, however, that this strategy often overlooks the representational work done in advertising, as if the commodity arrives fully mystified and advertising simply mirrors its existing aura. In fact, advertising adds layers of meaning to the object. Williams’ insight that “[i]t is impossible to look at modern advertising without realising that the material object being sold is never enough,” therefore has unexplored implications for interpretation. The object of interpretation, too, recedes from view, as interpretation looks past its surface—its material facticity—in order to discover its deeper signification. Depending on one’s level
of cynicism about this process, interpretation can resemble advertising in remarkable ways, adorning otherwise banal aesthetic objects with relevance and complexity. Indeed, in literary studies, interpretation often becomes a kind of plea for the text’s significance. It becomes a way to demonstrate the humanistic value of a given text and to establish its place in a broader network of culturally useful objects.

Thus, the “magic” of advertising—“always an unsuccessful attempt to provide meanings and values,” as Williams puts it—has its parallel in the aesthetic practices of art that encourages interpretation. In contrast, as I have shown, *The Ambassadors* often either forecloses the possibility of interpretation or, as in the case of the blank commodities early in the novel, renders it unsatisfyingly tentative and, indeed, a kind of violation of the stubborn actuality of the blankness at hand. Meanwhile, the novel’s suspended styles turn out to be a method for keeping the object in its materiality—in this case, the stylistic surface of the text—in full view, hence the frustrating difficulty of “getting behind” this style. Taking seriously the status of advertising as an art, *The Ambassadors* also intimates the powerful workings of desire within the process of interpretation, a process that is engendered by representationally sophisticated art. The scenes I’ve examined show how interpretation can be a method of acquisition; it is the way we come to know, and therefore in some sense to own, what we see and hear and touch in the real world. Strether stops short of appropriating his experiences in *The Ambassadors*, remaining instead in a position of wonder about them. His encounters with others in the novel are ultimately unproductive, not because they don’t affect him, but because Strether refuses to make them signify something more. He remains stuck in the experience itself. James enacts this unproductivity in style. Abstaining, refusing,
negating, subtracting—these are stylistic methods for arresting narration in a moment of engagement without appropriation. James thereby models a way of reading literature or looking at art that does not conform to a “consumption ideal.”

In *The Ambassadors*, an inquisitive attention to the world constitutes the exception to advertising’s acquisitive ideal. The novel has to renounce not only “happy endings” and “sympathetic characters” but the satisfying productivity of a clear style in order to break from this ideal. Whatever other power it has, advertising has little capacity for incapacity. *The Ambassadors*’ most incisive and devastating critique may emerge from its willingness, like that of its protagonist, to fail. In this respect, *The Ambassadors* presciently anticipates the spirit of later minimalisms, embracing as it does the possibility that art sometimes has to renounce its claim to meaning and significance in order to answer to challenges of the twentieth century.

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1 See Meyer, 3, 6-9, for a discussion of the contested definition of minimalism in the plastic arts, and Strickland, 4-7, for a definition of minimalism that extends to music and to literary works.

2 This latter strain is best exemplified by such influential critical texts as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “The Beast in the Closet: James and the Writing of Homosexual Panic” and Mark Seltzer’s *Henry James and the Art of Power*. For arguments more directly apropos of the one I make here, but similarly attuned to hidden motifs, see Salmon and Wicke, who suggest in different ways that advertising constitutes a suppressed presence throughout *The Ambassadors*.

3 See Best and Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” for a thorough survey of different reading strategies that could fall under the umbrella designation of “surface reading,” framing the emergence of these practices in relation to predominant depth-oriented interpretive models. See, also, Love, “Close but not Deep,” for an examination of the relationship between prevailing ideas about literary (and critical) value, on the one hand, and literary richness, meaning, and depth, on the other. See John Kucich, “The Unfinished Historician Project: In Praise of Suspicion,” for a nuanced counter argument.


5 *The Ambassadors* has 1328 question marks, of which at least 895 are in dialogue. This comes out to about an average of one question mark for 119 words in the novel,
compared with one question mark per 154 words in *The Golden Bowl*. For each of these novels, I have used the rudimentary tools of analysis in MS Word with downloaded copies of the novels (from Project Gutenberg) to count words and question marks. I have added some conjecture about the number of question marks appearing in dialogue by searching for a question mark immediately followed by quotation marks (?”). This will not, of course, count all the question marks appearing in dialogue, but it eliminates some. This elimination is worthwhile for my purposes because I am interested not in the questions in dialogue, but in questions as they appear in free indirect discourse. This is an important distinction: I am not interested, here, in how characters relate to each other, nor in the constitution of a character or characters, nor in characterization per se.

6 See Jehlen 163 for a discussion of this tense form in the novel and its relationship to Strether’s “authority.”

7 Jean-Christophe Agnew writes, “Something akin to embarrassment runs through those rare passages in James’s writing that explicitly take up the question of the commodity world” (190).

8 See Jennifer Wicke, 109-110, and Salmon, 152, for a discussion of *The Ambassadors’* preoccupation with advertising.
Chapter 2. The Anti-Exemplary Moment in Woolf and Joyce

I. The Moment

This chapter concerns itself with fiction: Virginia Woolf’s 1922 novel, *Jacob’s Room*, James Joyce’s *Dubliners* and the short prose “epiphanies” that preceded that collection. These works share in common a crucial organizing structure in the form of temporal and spatial limitation: the moment serves as the essential aesthetic unit in each. Furthermore, the moment is rendered in a distinctively minimalist manner in these works. Set apart and formally contained, moments function as non-sequiturs: they jarringly “do not follow” from the moments that precede them, nor lead into the moments that come after. Self-contained and aestheticized, the moment becomes a kind of form in these texts; their difference makes them defamiliarizing.¹ The moment emerges as an aesthetic unit both embedded in and curiously decontextualized from the flow of experience. Meanwhile, as a kind of form the moment fails, in these earlier writings, to produce insight or significance. The moment, here, appears austere and barren. It therefore provides neither microcosm nor synecdoche for the work as a whole. Instead, the moment constitutes a fragment that indicates the impossibility of the whole as a totality.

The emptiness or flatness of the moment in these earlier works stands in contrast to the significance accrued by that which is instantaneous in later works.² That Joyce and Woolf were interested in representing an experiential temporality measured in fragments as small as the moment suggests a concern with minutiae that is key to their intervention in earlier modes of fictional writing. However, if in later works the moment serves as a kind of lens for focusing attention on subjectivity as it is reflected in everyday
encounters, in the fiction on which this chapter is focused, the moment is evacuated. In this sense, Woolf and Joyce will nearly reverse their use of instantaneity in later works. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, for instance, the moment provides a kind of temporal frame for the constellation of subjective and objective phenomena; its delimited time-scale provides the scaffolding for Woolf’s experiments in intersubjectivity. In *Ulysses*, it is the accumulation of moments that produce significance, as Franco Moretti has suggested. These later works—both interested in the temporal boundaries of a single day—manipulate their representation of time-flow in service of “spatial form” in the classic modernist sense set forth by Joseph Frank as a method for creating “unified impact, the same sense of simultaneous activity occurring in different places,” and which Frank attributes to *Ulysses* as a whole (63). Frank’s conception of spatial form depends upon the disruption of narrative time in order to focus “attention…on the interplay of relationships within the limited time-area”; in such a text, “units of meaning are apprehended reflexively, in an instant of time” (62). For our purposes, there are two crucial differences between Frank’s spatial form and the spatialized instantaneity I locate in *Jacob’s Room, Epiphanies*, and *Dubliners*. First, Frank’s spatial form serves to evoke a unified whole[^3] and, second, thrives on comparisons within an environment (on the “satiric similarity” [61], for instance, between Rodolphe’s speech and the announcement of prizes for raising the best pigs at the country fair in *Madame Bovary*). Given their emphasis on individual moments, the texts I examine in this chapter traffic in similarly spatialized scenes: as Frank notes at one point, “perception in a moment of time” is, ostensibly, space[^4]. But insofar as they heighten discontinuity and compromise the
accumulation of a totality, they are examples of what I have called theatrical
spatialization, rather than the spatial form Frank describes.

The result in a novel such as *Jacob’s Room* is a kind of subtle incoherence within
the text as a whole. Roland Barthes suggests in his last lectures that such writerly
“moments of truth” are in fact the opposite of the novel form. By virtue of their
“solidarity, compactness, concision of affect and writing,” such moments appear as “[an]
intractable unit...[and] the sudden bursting forth of the uninterpretable, of the last degree
of meaning, of the after which there’s nothing more to say” (emphasis original, 107).
These are the two poles of writing, for Barthes: one short form’s extremity and the other,
the novel, the form of extension (108). Indeed, Barthes implies that the “moment of
truth” resists novelization, since the short form “is its own necessity and suffices in itself:
it can’t be stretched” (emphasis original, 89). As such, though the short form can capture
an event that is “instantly meaningful,” it also retains its paradoxical “inconsequentiality”
(102). Discussing the episodic narrativity of modernist fiction in “The Existence of Italy,”
Fredric Jameson speaks of something like this tension between the short form embedded
within the long as a kind of autonomy: “But their narrativity is that of the episode and not
of the work ‘as a whole,’ by which we probably mean the idea of the work, its ‘concept,’
what the single-world title of Joyce’s book is supposed, for example, to convey.
Autonomy—or, if you like, semi-autonomy—reemerges with a vengeance here...”
(208).5

If Jameson dismisses out of hand the notion that episodic texts are somehow non-
narrative—“as though there were any non-narrative moments in *Ulysses* (or in Virginia
Woolf, for that matter)!” he exclaims (108)—Woolf herself no doubt recognized the
problem instantaneity posed for narrative form. Placing the novel and the play “side by side” in “Notes on an Elizabethan Play,” she notices how the novel is “long leisurely accumulated” and the play, “little” and “contracted”—“the play, after all, is poetry”: “the emotion all split up, dissipated and then woven together, slowly and gradually massed into a whole, in the novel; the emotion concentrated, generalized, heightened in the play. What moments of intensity, what phrases of astonishing beauty the play shot at us!” (66). Later, she sees the play’s province as “the general,” and the novel’s, “the particular” (67). (Barthes includes the Brechtian gestus—a dramatic technique that, although instant, provokes a recollection of the general in an audience—in his catalog of short forms.) In fact, Woolf’s use of short forms embedded in Jacob’s Room blurs the generic demarcation she has set up, here. Further, Jacob’s Room emphasizes not the “massed…whole” of the novel, but its “accumulated” parts; the disjunction of those parts contributes to Woolf’s vision of Jacob’s life as something other than a unified whole. In this, she follows her famous plea in “Modern Fiction” (1925): “Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small” (emphases added, 161). Thus, the non-narrative, non-accumulative nature of the moment as I have been describing it at least partially comports with Woolf’s view of the enterprise of fiction.

The project of this chapter is an excavation of both the Woolfian atom as such and of the incoherence of the atomic method. The moment is as unmeaningful in itself as the atom alone (which is, in any case, mostly empty space). Yet these texts frequently
occasion the impossible task of imagining the atom as discrete from the universe in which it is embedded. Thus, the aestheticized moment in *Jacob’s Room*, the epiphanies, and *Dubliners* becomes a site for thinking about the complicated independence of art from life—complicated because incomplete, ambivalent, inside-out. Minimal form in these texts turns out to be a method for imagining how an aesthetic thing might be both embedded and separate, paradoxically part of a whole without being constitutive of it. In brooding over the unsettling emptiness of moments that seem to promise insight, these texts wonder over their own relationship to the world. The question—Barthes’s question in *The Preparation of the Novel*—“How does one make narrative, and in particular, the novel, out of discrete moments?” runs parallel, in these texts, to another set of aesthetic problems: How is an artwork part of the world? How is the world part of an artwork? What remains, *unsubsumable* (for lack of a better term), each to each? Barthes viewed the novel “in its grand and extended continuity” as “an interweaving...a vast, extended canvas...scattered with Moments of Truth that are its absolute justification” (108). But he also viewed such moments as “intractable unit[s]” and “the last degree of meaning,” “not an unveiling” (107). Such moments cannot be made to *mean* in any extended fashion; they partake of aesthetic purity and of the concreteness that characterizes the world.

Meanwhile, the intractable flatness of the moment—the emptiness of the proverbial atom—in the texts that follow constitutes the other part of their anxious unravelling of the totality of any given work, and indeed of totality itself. Paul K. Saint-Amour has recently argued that “modernist counter-epic interrupts its own tendency to replicate the totalizing energy of epic in the course of resisting its political logic. Internal compartmentalization...[is one of] the means by which the genre [of modernist counter-
epic] delimits and impedes the project it nonetheless cannot refuse to undertake, a project that must be comprehensive while emphatically avoiding coherentism” (186). Such “coherentism” is arguably even more seriously undermined when the “internal compartments” of a text turn out to hold nothing of significance. As Woolf and Joyce seem to have been aware, the very authority of the work of art is put in jeopardy by such an emptying-out. But my argument here is more concerned with how the entire dialectic of part and whole—and, therefore, the entire notion of coherence—is given a new dimension when the part is allowed to be less than meaningful. Joyce’s and Woolf’s ruminations on the nature of the aesthetic moment’s autonomy from the flow of experience and the totality of the work constitutes an examination of the interplay between part and whole, the concrete and the abstract, and fiction’s capacity to shuttle between them. At the same time, the trivial detail continually comes under scrutiny. These details resist fiction- or novel-writing, in Joyce’s and Woolf’s early work, too insistently external and even inhuman to become “significant” either psychologically or philosophically. Indeed, I argue that Joyce’s and Woolf’s most minimal texts evince a concern about fiction’s irresistible productive movement towards significance. The minimalism of concretion returns us to the realm of the work’s resolute ordinariness: the tactility of the book and the mundane sound of language. Like all minimal texts, these sometimes retreat from the representation of the world in order to remind us that literature is a thing in the world.

Ultimately, minimal form becomes a method for critiquing the workings of exemplarity in narrative. The example, after all, functions as a significant part from which the whole can be derived or constructed. For Woolf and Joyce, the problem of
exemplarity extends to the way in which fiction makes a life of accumulated particulars as well as to the almost irresistible becoming-exemplary of narrative itself; it is a problem both within fiction and of fiction. Timothy Bewes offers a useful definition of exemplarity that captures this trait:

Exemplarity is a conceptual relationship in which the parts of a work are linked to a whole. The “whole” in this formulation is not just the whole of the work but that of a world of which the work is a part, and to which the work and the exemplary instance within it are tied by the work’s claim to relevance, to legibility. Exemplarity is the fabric of connectivity in which the literary work has its being. It is the always-unstated logic according to which readers identify with the characters of a work, or by which they may search in it for indications of how to live. Exemplarity is a bridge between the world about which we read and the world in which we read; it links the sensuous and the conceptual. (1)

“Since exemplarity is part of the logic of fiction,” Bewes affirms, “it will be apparent that its refusal is also a rejection (or renegotiation) of the category of fiction itself” (7). And, indeed, the “category of fiction” comes under significant pressure in the works I survey, here. In particular, the turn against exemplarity in these texts plays out through their engagement with the elegiac impulse. Both writers locate in elegy a strong tendency towards misleading holism that is, in turn, linked with nationalism’s discourse of aggression. Their quarrel is not with the work of mourning, but with the retrospective re-assembly of a life as a series of exemplary moments and, finally, with the way in which nationalist discourse exploits the lives of dead young men, making them exemplary of a nation.
To envision how the problem of the example might obtain, here, we need look no further than Woolf’s epistolary essay, *Three Guineas*. *Three Guineas* famously draws a connection between patriarchal tyranny in private and public life, and it does so with critical recourse to a specific genre of writing: biography. Woolf engages with this body of literature as a source of “evidence,” finding it alternately lacking and illuminating. As she does so, she is also implicitly exploring the problem of how a life becomes exemplary. *Three Guineas* is invested in the figure of the individual in its exemplarity: Woolf’s final contention that “the public and private worlds are inseparably connected” and “the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and the servilities of the other” depends upon her image of the intricately uniformed Führer/Duce as tyranny’s *exemplar* (142). In a sense, then, this much later text (1938) has embraced exemplarity in this mode. At the same time, however, *Three Guineas* remains a remarkably multifaceted text. By turns sarcastic and trenchant and (less often) earnest, each section of *Three Guineas* proceeds in epistolary fashion, and the writing is dense with dialogic turns as the speaker anticipates and simulates the responses of her imagined interlocutors. It is ultimately, crucially, a *performance* that announces itself as such. In the end, the speaker exhorts her readers in precisely the terms of performance. Insisting on the “*human* figure” (142, emphasis added) in the photograph of the tyrant, she writes, “It suggests that we cannot dissociate ourselves from that figure but are ourselves that figure. It suggests that we are not passive spectators doomed to unresisting obedience but by our thoughts and actions can ourselves change that figure. A common interest unites us; it is one world, one life” (142). The Führer is an instantiation; the Führer is also a human body, “braced in an unnatural position…tightly cased in a uniform.” *Three Guineas* holds these two
ways of seeing in tension: the individual-as-example is always subject to slipping between its abstraction and its specific physicality. Woolf makes her case through a logic of substitutability, but she also seeks to dismantle this logic behind her as she goes.

If *Jacob’s Room* frequently adheres to opaque concretion, then, it would seem to do so against the same logic, which might otherwise make Jacob’s death heroic or necessary or simply representative. Similarly, in the *Epiphanies*, the death of Joyce’s younger brother, Georgie, brings about several meditations on the consolation (or lack thereof) provided by various forms of substitution, as the processes of death lay bare the juxtaposition of selves and bodies. But in Joyce’s oeuvre it is perhaps his most famous short story, “The Dead,” that most complicates the passage from the aestheticized moment; to the individual life, mourned; to the prospective life of a nation. Each of these works vexes fiction’s movement between the concretion of the moment, a fragment in time, and the abstraction of the nation from such a fragment. The question, in these texts, is not how to construct a whole that is less or more than the sum of its parts, but how to imagine a whole of parts that are unsummable.

II. Woolf

*Jacob’s Room* is a novel organized not around a single consciousness, but around its absence. Jacob’s death in the war reverberates outside of chronology: the future resonance of his surname comes to fruition. He is, in other words, an absent presence. Hence the insistent unavailability of his consciousness to the otherwise omniscient narrator, who wonders “why are we yet surprised in the window corner by a sudden vision that the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most
solid, the best known to us—why indeed? For the moment after we know nothing about him” (72-73). To speak of Jacob’s intense presence-in-absence is indeed to invoke the ways in which the novel tends to be considered by critics: it is generally read as elegy, with its final arresting images—the creaking of an empty chair, the raising of a totemic pair of shoes—emphasizing once and for all the vividness of Jacob’s memory. For Douglas Mao, the “trace” (53) of Jacob’s body even presents the possibility of “intersubjective mediations” (54) through the object world: “the whole energy of Jacob’s Room seems directed toward the culminating scene in which Jacob’s mother and Bonamy confront Jacob’s relics, only to be left unsatisfied by this mediation, which can never be substitution” (54-55).

*Jacob’s Room* may refuse to represent Jacob’s mind, but according to Jessica Burstein, “the self persists as a problem in [Woolf’s] works, albeit one at times gladdened or maddened by the possibility that she or he need not be” (28). And so despite the odd insistence of the narrator, at times, that Jacob himself must remain distant, the novel’s ending seems to bring him unbearably, preternaturally close. Bonamy and Mrs. Flanders may in fact sit where he sat—indeed, where his spectral memory seems still to be sitting. This culmination casts the foregoing novel in a light of anticipatory mourning; from the vantage point of 1922, the war’s shadow is long. Paul Saint-Amour likens the particular temporality of anticipation throughout Woolf’s writing to the trauma studies model of disaster, where that which is “historically in the past…remains psychically imminent.”

But although the “not yet” in Woolf has a power to shock, its imminence is not only psychic but also historical in that the event has not yet, in fact, happened. It is not only individual but also, at least potentially, collective in that the event, if it
happens, will happen to others, too. And its symptoms appear to lead both backward and forward in time—back to past shocks that help set one on edge, and forward to the disaster that may be about to arrive. (93)

Saint-Amour’s reading of suspense brings out, for the first time, the peculiar experience of time generated by the world wars—an experience for which Woolf’s novels and stories found myriad forms, including the “Time Passes” section of To the Lighthouse. Jacob’s Room, meanwhile, makes readers anticipate the coming of war through Jacob’s projected death. Reading retrospectively, as we must, his life seems full of his death. We are apt, therefore, to read his many absences as a strange kind of presence. If the novel refuses to fulfill that function so central to novel-making—that of portraying a character’s consciousness—it seems to do so in the service of capturing something else, namely history.

Yet Jacob’s Room also deploys numerous methods for arresting both that unconventional history and the narrative itself. In fact, Jacob’s absences and the novel as a whole read differently in light of Woolf’s use of minimal stylistic strategies to generate suspended moments that open outward, spatially, rather than temporally. These moments are like stones beneath the inexorable current of history as it moves towards the war: in Woolf’s telling, history bends and eddies around the moments that make up everyday life. In many analyses of Woolf’s writing, it is the quotidian content of such moments that takes center stage. In contrast, I consider how Woolf’s idea of the moment and her emphasis on the momentary give structure to Jacob’s absence. I ask what it might do to our conception of Jacob’s Room to look at the character’s scarcity itself, rather than at the ripples that move outward from it. What does it mean to deprive the novel of its most
cherished function? What comes to the foreground when Jacob recedes? How is Jacob’s slightness reflected in the novel’s thinness of means?

For *Jacob’s Room* is scant in ways other than the reticent representation of Jacob. In a letter to Lytton Strachey responding to his thoughts on the novel, Woolf intimates that the novel “break[s] with complete representation,” writing, “Of course you put your infallible finger upon the spot—romanticism. How do I catch it? Not from my father. I think it must have been my Great Aunts. But some of it, I think, comes from the effort of breaking with complete representation. One flies into the air. Next time, I mean to stick closer to facts” (*JR* 210). If, after the novel’s printing, she felt she had somehow produced a deliberately thin piece of writing, Woolf’s diary attests to the novel’s subtractions as it was in the process of being written. She conceived of *Jacob’s Room* as a formal—even a formalist—undertaking, in which many elements of typical novelistic structure have been jettisoned. On January 26, 1920, she writes:

> The day after my birthday; in fact I’m 38. Well, I’ve no doubt I’m a great deal happier than I was at 28; & happier than I was yesterday having this afternoon arrived at some idea of a new form for a new novel. Suppose one thing should open out of another—as in An Unwritten Novel—only not for 10 pages but 200 or so—doesn’t that give the looseness & lightness I want: doesn’t that get closer & yet keep form & speed, & enclose everything, everything? My doubt is how far it will enclose the human heart—Am I sufficiently mistress of my dialogue to net it there? For I figure that the approach will be entirely different this time: no scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen; all crepuscular, but the heart, the passion, humour, everything as bright as fire in the mist. Then I’ll find room for so
much—a gaiety—an inconsequence—a light spirited stepping at my sweet will. Whether I’m sufficiently mistress of things—that’s the doubt; but conceive mark on the wall, K[ew]. G[ardens]. & unwritten novel taking hands & dancing in unity. What the unity shall be I have yet to discover: the theme is a blank to me; but I see immense possibilities in the form I hit upon more or less by chance 2 weeks ago. (13-14)

As her diary makes clear, Woolf understood the formal shift enacted in *Jacob’s Room* in terms of subtractions: disassembling “scaffolding” and inviting “inconsequence,” towards “looseness & lightness.” Writing fast—“in a frenzy” (86), like riding a horse at a gallop (55)—she relied on an imagined spatial unity to keep *Jacob’s Room* whole: “Let us suppose that the Room will hold it together” (Bishop Holograph 1, qtd. in “Introduction”). This spatial unity is, of course, traditionally modernist and, as we have seen, significantly minimalist. It is the unity associated with short form, from which *Jacob’s Room* seems to have descended. Meanwhile, the primary “danger” Woolf perceives in such a formal template attests to its emptiness: its vacuum tends to draw in “the damned egotistical self” (14).

As with many of the texts this project examines, critics have attempted to rescue the novel from charges of empty formalism. Alex Zwerdling, for instance, both acknowledges and dismisses the novel’s reticence: based partly on Woolf’s introductory comments on *Mrs. Dalloway*, Zwerdling insists that *Jacob’s Room* cannot be thought of as “simply a technical exercise” (62). In order to make the essay’s rather ingenious political argument, then, Zwerdling argues that the novel’s style must be “a means to an end” (64). “There is obviously something artificial and deliberate in such narrative
reticence,” he writes of the “excisions” Woolf made between the holograph draft and the final version, obscuring Jacob’s thoughts; he concludes that this reticence must preserve Jacob as an “unknown quantity” (70). But after it was finished, Woolf herself seemed only to deflate the aspirations of *Jacob’s Room* further, writing of it as “nothing but an experiment, as I’ve always said; an interesting experiment; and nothing more.”

As an experiment, *Jacob’s Room* seems successful, fulfilling many of Woolf’s formal ideas for it. There is “scarcely a brick to be seen”: scant plot, slight characters, and at the center of it, Jacob’s absence. Much of the novel is broken into fragments of varying length; some are quite brief—only a sentence—while others might stand alone as short sketches. Woolf’s style in *Jacob’s Room* likewise inclines towards terseness and factual description, at least in comparison with later works. Many of Woolf’s most economical passages adhere to concrete imagery, often using the indefinite article to heighten the flat facticity of a world impervious to human concerns. Indeed, the novel’s first chapter enacts Jacob’s assimilation of surprising external phenomena through the passage from indefinite to definite article. Often, Woolf enacts rapid shifts between styles, from straightforward and short to lyrical, searching sentences replete with commas and semicolons. Zwerdling writes that such shifts serve to undo any heroic narrative for Jacob, preserving Woolf’s “double awareness of the sharpness of grief and its absurdity” (82). “Woolf’s elegiac novel is persistently small-scaled, mischievous and ironic,” he writes (73). Jacob is never portrayed sentimentally, despite his tragic fate. Instead, “Woolf’s elegy for the young men who died in the war is revisionist: there is nothing grand about Jacob; the sacrifice of his life seems perfectly pointless” (73). What emerges,
then, might indeed be thought of as absurd or satiric: an elegy for a blank space where a young man used to be.

The fifth chapter of the novel is exemplary with respect to the stylistic and tonal juxtapositions I’ve just noted. This chapter introduces, early on, several strings of declarative sentences before moving to several that wind along musically, exploring less concrete matters. Indeed, this chapter serves as something of a turn in the novel, addressing more explicitly “the narrator’s uneven authority and inconsistent relationship to the textual world” (Wall 282). Some of these musings point in an almost Beckettian, minimalist direction: “Then his mouth—but surely, of all futile occupations this cataloguing features is the worst. One word is sufficient. But if one cannot find it?” (55). Following this question—answering it, almost—is one of the novel’s large gaps.

Then there is Jacob, “a young man of substance.” Strictly speaking, Jacob’s mind is not wholly unrepresented; it appears in hints, as if peeking through a curtain, from time to time. Often, these peeks into Jacob’s thoughts are made strange by strange locutions. “Yet something of pity was in him,” the narrator says of Jacob, who departs full of scorn after a luncheon with George Plumer, Professor of Physics, who owns the works of Wells and Shaw and “serious sixpenny weeklies written by pale men in muddy boots” (34, 33). In short order, the narrator describes Jacob as “impressionable”—a cliché carrying both literal and figurative connotations—and “a young man of substance” (34). It is as if Woolf is reaching for a language of emotion or judgment exterior to the self: Jacob as clay-like matter. The narrator sometimes adopts a pose of exacting concretion. “The light drenched Jacob from head to toe,” Woolf writes.
You could see the pattern on his trousers; the old thorns on his stick; his shoe
laces; bare hands; and face.

It was as if stone were ground to dust; as if white sparks flew from a livid
whetstone, which was his spine; as if the switchback railway, having swooped to
the depths, fell, fell, fell. This was in his face. (98)

Here, the body and its accoutrements stand in for thought, and Jacob’s emotions—what is
“in his face”—are likened to hard, inhuman materials. Not only does the description belie
the typical terms of interiority, the passage reads like a terse allegory for the frustration of
narratorial looking. Even in the spotlight the novel trains on Jacob, “you could see” only
what is visible. That this phrase is anchored to the second person only heightens the
distancing effect of the passage, as if neither Jacob’s nor the narrator’s thoughts were
available. Nonetheless, a disembodied look gazes on.

Elsewhere, the novel’s refusal to narrate Jacob’s mind takes other forms. The
narrator skirts the problem: “It is scarcely necessary to say how well-disposed Jacob felt
towards them; how it pleased him to let himself in with his latch-key at his own door”
(117). Or, later: “What for? What for?’ Jacob never asked himself any such questions, to
judge by the way he laced his boots” (170). In love with Sandra Wentworth Williams,
Jacob as a novelistic subject seems momentarily accessible; his thoughts appear directly
in the text. (“‘For one thing he wouldn’t come,’ he [Jacob] thought. ‘And then I daresay
this sort of thing wears off’” [157]). Mostly, however, the novel discharges its duty to say
something about the goings-on in Jacob’s mind by approaching the moment for
revelation and then meticulously avoiding it. Thus, Woolf’s abiding image of the narrator
as a “hawk moth,” fluttering around a lamp, again in the novel’s fifth chapter:
But something is always impelling one to hum vibrating, like the hawk moth, at the mouth of the cavern of mystery, endowing Jacob Flanders with all sorts of qualities he had not at all—for though, certainly, he sat talking to Bonamy, half of what he said was too dull to repeat; much unintelligible (about unknown people and Parliament); what remains is mostly a matter of guess work. Yet over him we hang vibrating. (57)

This passage—one of the novel’s most famous—is notable for its frank admission that the novel’s subject fails to justify the narrator’s (and our) attention to him. Meanwhile, the metaphor Woolf constructs for the work of the narrator is much more surprising than critics have generally recognized. Here is an image of the narrator as an insect distinguished for its ability to hover in flight like a hummingbird. The hawk moth, then, captures the insistent attention of Woolf’s narrator, but also its relative mindlessness, its automatism.

The metaphor of the hawk moth draws us into the instantaneity of narratorial looking, at odds with the novel’s prospective elegiac frame. The hawk moth is (perhaps) more inescapably “in the moment” than any human could ever be: it “hum[s] vibrating” in midair because it is thoroughly and completely—in Heidegger’s terms—“captivated,” limned in its immediate environment, unrecognizing of its own captivation. Woolf’s narrator is likewise “impel[ed]” by “something” that remains mysterious to her. This model of attention is in some sense a provocation, as it were, to minimalism, since there seems to be an inherent poverty to the viewpoint as Woolf describes it—absorption, that is, without comprehension. Woolf’s choice of this image for the narrator is significantly in tension with the novel’s elegiac temporality. The hawk moth neither partakes of human
history nor conceives of human mortality; it lives moment to moment in its concentration on Jacob. It ought to be acknowledged that this is a remarkable and even transgressive vision of the narrator. Here Woolf imagines a narrator in thrall to her subject, drawn not by intellectual discrimination but by instinct or appetite; a narrator with access to neither the character’s past nor a broader history; a narrator incapable of explication; in short, an almost incapacitated narrator. What becomes of the novel in such a narrator’s hands?

Of course, *Jacob’s Room* makes many departures from this vision of narration. But the metaphor reveals how Woolf’s conception of the momentary or instantaneous shapes *Jacob’s Room*, which explores a radical reduction of novelistic means by attempting to delineate moments in time as self-contained objects of representation. Woolf achieves this containment through various formal techniques, including frequent use of negative conjunctions and idiosyncratic spacing, used to set off almost stanzaic paragraphs.

Woolf’s uses negative conjunctions, usually “but,” for abrupt shifts or juxtapositions that often puncture and deflate what comes before them:

Yes, the chimneys and the coast-guard stations and the little bays with the waves breaking unseen by any one make one remember the overpowering sorrow. And what can this sorrow be?

It is brewed by the earth itself. It comes from the houses on the coast. We start transparent, and then the cloud thickens. All history backs our pane of glass. To escape is vain.
But whether this is the right interpretation of Jacob’s gloom as he sat naked, in
the sun, looking at the Land’s End, it is impossible to say; for he never spoke a
word. (37)

Before the break, the narrator speaks with authority; the paragraph even begins, “No
doubt…” And the question posed at the end of the paragraph and its response after the
break are not entirely in different registers. Yet the rather freighted answer, entailing
nothing less than “all history,” is immediately undermined in its seriousness and authority
by that strategic “but.” The reader, meanwhile, is drawn back into the narrator’s
limitations and, crucially, into a still, self-contained image. The “but” and what comes
after it seems to rebuke the fatalistic tone of the preceding paragraph, which may echo—
especially in its invocation of history—the kind of performatively virile, pugilistic
language that Woolf despised. At the same time, this “but” pivots the narrator’s attention
back to Jacob, rendered again as almost a thing of marble or clay, naked like classical
statuary. The tone of the passage has unexpectedly shifted, too, and remains wryly
insistent about the narrator’s limitations. Thus, Woolf’s rhetorical pivot demarcates a
scene highlighting the narrator’s vision of Jacob in a given moment, tethering us to the
narrative’s present time. In contrast to the answering voice stating with certainty (“It is…
It comes… We start… All history…”), what follows the “but” casts all interpretation as
unreliable, even vain. The moment, set off and contained, remains flatly uninterpretable.

This scene is later recapitulated—with a difference—as Mrs. Flanders and Mrs.
Jarvis walk upon the moors of the Roman camp while a church clock keeps time. The
section follows a conspicuous gap, that itself follows a sentence concerning Jacob’s
failed letter-writing to his mother, interrupted by a dash. We find Mrs. Flanders and Mrs.
Jarvis talking of Jacob’s letters, cutting out a dress. Soon, they decide to take a walk. The scene continues in a carefully paced manner, with the church clock striking, as the characters’ memories of the place and the narrator’s ruminations on it gradually overtake the sparse conversation. Frequently, the narrator’s musings take the form of questions that tend to dwell on the indifference of the earth and the dead:

Did the bones stir, or the rusty swords? Was Mrs. Flander’s two-penny-halfpenny brooch for ever part of the rich accumulation? and if all the ghosts flocked thick and rubbed shoulders with Mrs. Flanders in the circle, would she not have seemed perfectly in her place, a live English matron, growing stout?

The clock struck the quarter. (106)

The section as a whole emphasizes the passive quiet of the moors, which accept human activity in all its frivolousness without comment. “Motionless and broad-backed the moors received the statement. ‘It is fifteen minutes past the hour,’ but made no answer, unless a bramble stirred” (106). Thus, a kind of parallel between the women who walk upon the moor and the moor itself seems possible: if the moor receives human activity, uncomplaining, so, too, does Mrs. Flanders (an English matron, at home with the ghosts), receive Jacob’s inadequate letters.

The section and the chapter end with the floating of the two women’s voices above the camp after they have departed:

…They began to walk home.

But their voices floated for a little above the camp. The moonlight destroyed nothing. The moor accepted everything. Tom Gage cries aloud so long as his tombstone endures. The Roman skeletons are in safe keeping. Betty Flanders’s
darning needles are safe too and her garnet brooch. And sometimes at mid-day, in the sunshine, the moor seems to hoard these little treasures, like a nurse. But at midnight when no one speaks or gallops, and the thorn tree is perfectly still, it would be foolish to vex the moor with questions—what? and why?

The church clock, however, strikes twelve. (107)

This final passage enacts a series of turns, all executed with Woolf’s precise conjunctions. These subtle links also mark shifts in tone and style: from the short declarative sentences describing the human detritus of the moors (expressing, in several cases, entirely fantastical things); to the longer sentence that personifies the moor at midday; to a sentence that both professes the foolishness of asking questions and manages almost to ask them, anyway; to the chapter’s end, in which the church clock—and the passage of time, marked by the close of one day and the start of another—has the final word. Tonally, this section has much in common with the passage I’ve discussed above. And it similarly, if less obviously, uses rapid shifts in style to introduce tension between narrator’s omniscience and her limitations. That she judges it “foolish to vex the moor with questions” casts a shadow on the questions already asked. The last sentence’s phrasing underlines the interruption, the relentlessness, of time passing. We are jolted back into the moment, and left with the ringing of the church clock at the chapter’s close.

What I am describing here is a two-fold deflation: first, the containment of a given instant, and second, a move of overturning or undermining or simply grounding the narrative through the interruptive concretion of such self-contained moments. Quite often, they return us to the narrative present in its banal regularity. In this last example, the clock striking midnight arrives with a not insignificant note of menace. The war is
coming; to ask what or why at such a late date is useless. But it’s important to notice, too, that Woolf might have retained a more thoroughly ominous tone had she omitted the “however,” which punctures the sentence. Meanwhile, we’re transported to (by) the present-tense: “no one speaks or gallops,” “the thorn tree is perfectly still,” the questions are of an instant, and the clock “strikes twelve.” This tense, too, serves to demarcate the moment we’re in, setting it off from the past-tense narrative. Such self-contained moments are minimal in a rather classic sense: concrete, trivial, “out” of narrative time-flow.

This effect is even more pronounced in places where Woolf has used unorthodox spacing and paragraphing to produce strikingly brief flashes that seem to erupt into the narrative. Just like her use of “but” and “however,” Woolf’s creation of almost stanzaic paragraphs generates instances of aggressive non-sequitur. Some of these paragraphs are jarringly brief:

“Ja—cob! Ja—cob!” Archer shouted. (3, repeated on 4)

Jacob Flanders, therefore, went up to Cambridge in October, 1906. (21)

“Let’s go round to Simeon’s room,” said Jacob, and they rolled up the map, having got the whole thing settled. (32)

So Clara left him. (70)

Many are thematically connected, dealing with the lives of women:

Florinda was sick.

Mrs. Durrant, sleepless as usual, scored a mark by the side of certain lines in the Inferno.

Clara slept buried in her pillows; on her dressing-table dishevelled roses and a pair of white gloves. (60)
Or showing characters engaged in everyday banter:

“You won’t go far this afternoon, Jacob,” said his mother, popping her head in the at the door, “for the Captain’s coming to say good-bye.” It was the last day of the Easter holidays. (17)

“Tut-tut!” said Mr. Bowley in his dressing-room an hour later. “Tut-tut!”—a comment that was profound enough, though inarticulately expressed, since his valet was handing his shirt studs. (135)

A short section beginning the second chapter of the novel consists almost entirely of comments made by unknown persons about Betty Flanders’s relationship with Captain Barfoot (9), and a series of especially terse sections made exclusively of dialogue close the novel’s seventh chapter (68-70). As these examples make clear, Woolf’s short sections often have a way of highlighting the time, citing calendar time (October, 1906; the Easter holidays) or daily time (Florinda, Mrs. Durrant, and Clara are all turning in for the night), or indicating a gesture that, again, marks the moment or the momentary (rolling up the map, handing over shirt studs). The passages of dialogue, punctuated before and after by blank space, seem almost dramatic. And while Archer’s echoing call for his brother will reverberate throughout the novel, Woolf’s choice to render the name in syllables is sonically evocative, tethering us, again, into a discrete instant.

There are thematic exceptions. At least one of the brief vignettes in the novel revolves around the natural world; therefore, in contrast to the everyday content of the passage above, it jolts us from the frame of human concerns altogether. A paragraph set off from the rest of the text by sizeable blank spaces above and below describes the behavior of rooks; the only human activity in the passage is the dinner bell which sets the rooks flying again, for a moment, at the end of the paragraph (43). Later, a short scene
describes “spaces of complete immobility” broken only by a lantern, a car, “a mournful cry” as the snow falls (78). And some of these sections depict silence, rather than conversation:

Well, not a word of this was ever told to Mrs. Flanders; nor what happened when they paid the bill and left the restaurant, and walked along the Boulevard Raspaille. (101)

And finally under the arc lamps in the Gare des Invalides, with one of those queer movements which are ever so slight yet so definite, which may wound or pass unnoticed but generally inflict a good deal of discomfort, Jinny and Cruttendon drew together; Jacob stood apart. They had to separate. Something must be said. Nothing was said. A man wheeled a trolley past Jacob’s legs so near that he almost grazed them. When Jacob recovered his balance the other two were turning away, though Jinny looked over her shoulder, and Cruttendon, waving his hand, disappeared like the very great genius he was. (105)

Regardless of its content, however, in each instance Woolf figures the moment as a discrete aesthetic unit by isolating it formally. Other critics have noted how this method contributes to a sense that there is something both serial and pictorial about the novel: “Woolf’s narrator seeks, through the use of vivid, composed descriptive passages which resemble verbal paintings (and recall some painterly conventions like the still life or the impressionist landscape), to create both a momentary timelessness and an almost tragic fall back into time” (Wall 283). Francesca Kazan likens the novel’s white spaces to a series of frames that “set apart” (703) fragments of “pictorial writing” (701). Although I largely disagree that Woolf’s writing is ekphrastic, as Kathleen Wall claims, these critics’ recourse to the visual arts is useful, for it gives us metaphors for the novel’s form that emphasize the smallness and discreteness of its scenes or episodes. Imagining, as Edward L. Bishop does, “the book as a whole [as] like an album of snapshots” (315), we get a sense of the tensions inherent in the episodic or serial form of the novel. Time is in large
part limited in the individual passage, even as it sweeps forward by inches or miles across scenes or chapters. Meanwhile, each scene’s banality is in tension with the potentiality conferred by its relative isolation: as in Joyce’s epiphanies, each passage might represent a work of art unto itself. Like *Epiphanies*, then, *Jacob’s Room* both aestheticizes the moment and undermines its significance. Here we see minimalism’s double-edge, cutting both ways: elevating and undercutting, isolating and serializing.

III. Joyce

Despite its muddy origins in Joyce’s thought, the epiphany has long served as an interpretive “key” to his work. The concept is explained only once in his oeuvre, in the precursor to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Stephen Hero* (1904):

A young lady was standing on the steps of one of those brown brick houses which seem the very incarnation of Irish paralysis. A young gentleman was leaning on the rusty railings of the area. Stephen as he passed on his quest heard the following fragment of colloquy out of which he received an impression keen enough to afflict his sensiveness very severely.

The Young Lady -- (drawling discreetly) . . . O, yes . . . I was . . . at the. . .cha. . . pel. . .

The Young Gentleman -- (inaudibly) . . . I. . . (again inaudibly) . . . I . . .

The Young Lady -- (softly) . . . O. . . but you're. . . ve. . . ry. . . wick. . . ed. . .

This triviality made him think of collecting many such moments together in a book of epiphanies. By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phrase of the mind itself. He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments. He told Cranly that the clock of the Ballast Office was capable of an epiphany. Cranly questioned the inscrutable dial of the Ballast Office with his no less inscrutable countenance:

--Yes, said Stephen. I will pass it time after time, allude to it, refer to it, catch a glimpse of it. It is only an item in the catalogue of Dublin's street furniture. Then all at once I see it and I know at once what it is: epiphany.

--What?
Imagine my glimpses at that clock as the gropings of a spiritual eye which seeks to adjust its vision to an exact focus. The moment the focus is reached the object is epiphanyised. (211)

What can we safely assert about the epiphany, based on this passage? I would argue that we are secure in thinking of the epiphany as both brief and sudden; in other words, to use the terms this chapter has been laying out, the epiphany is a moment of non-sequitur. We may err in going beyond that, however. Although the Thomist notion of quidditas—the “whatness” of an object like the Ballast Office clock—inspires Stephen’s definition, the epiphany seems not to be reducible to a property of objects, since it also encompasses idiosyncratic human behavior (“vulgarity of speech or of gesture”) and internal states (“a memorable phrase of the mind itself”), and since it seems to emerge from the subject’s encounter with the object. Moreover, these examples seem to be at odds with the possibility of a “sudden spiritual manifestation,” which is aligned instead with the original Christian meaning of epiphany as Christ’s appearance to the Magi. As it is articulated in Stephen Hero, then, the Joycean “epiphany” is extraordinarily opaque, even contradictory. By Ulysses, it has become a point of self-parody for Stephen. Walking the mud-flats of Sandymount in “Proteus,” he reflects, “Remember your epiphanies on green oval leaves, deeply deep, copies to be sent if you died to all the great libraries of the world, including Alexandria?” (40).

Yet there is a sense in which Stephen’s sarcastic question contains a neutral insight about these epiphanies: they were always the opposite of “deep” by virtue of their form. Here, it becomes necessary to distinguish between the conceptual definition of epiphany and the definition that plays out in Joyce’s compositional experiments, for the two are not entirely compatible. Moreover, the general critical sense of Joycean epiphany
has been derived rather selectively from Stephen’s inconsistent definition. If Stephen’s
definition in *Stephen Hero* holds in place the extreme inconsequentiality of the epiphany
along with its significance, critics have been eager to ignore the first part, which is
admittedly inconvenient to the enterprise of criticism itself. Nonetheless, it is the
inconsequence of the epiphany that Joyce pursues in his brief prose-sketch epiphanies
and that he later emphasizes when Stephen recalls his epiphanies self-deprecatingly in
*Ulysses*. Indeed, it is possible that the everyday developed its distinctive centrality in
Joyce’s work through the epiphany *form*, which isolates small things and produces, from
this decontextualization, an aesthetic unit; later Joycean narrative would absorb and
convey the everyday in segmented or episodic fashion in accordance with this aesthetic
insight.²⁰ In effect, the residue of the epiphany form preserves the triviality of its objects.
Like Woolf’s discrete instants in *Jacob’s Room*, the minimalism of the epiphany is not
merely a product of its concision: both are brief, as the moment itself requires, but also
disjunctive and jarringly empty.
If this point is particularly apropos of Joyce’s prose sketches, those sketches themselves
ought to guide us towards a model of the conceptual epiphany that is minimal rather than
magisterial. Even the apparently “significant” part of Stephen’s definition leaves open the
possibility that the epiphany only promises insight. A “sudden spiritual manifestation” in
fact disrupts traditional narrative temporality, where complex causality is paramount and
meaning unfolds or builds; bare “manifestation”—compact, sudden, and without
explanation—takes the place of meaning gradually constructed and unearthed by the
author or the reader. Further, “manifestation” evokes optical presence, and it is therefore
a term more at home with modes of visual representation.²¹ And, as we will see, the
epiphany’s manifestations often remain superficial—representation reduced to manifestation, decidedly lacking in psychological depth. In this respect, they share a family resemblance with Woolf’s disjunctive moments in *Jacob’s Room*, even to their often trenchant excision of human elements. The minimal form of the epiphany, visual and instantaneous, is thus in many ways the very antithesis of *Ulysses*’ narrative abundance.

Stripped of authorial comment, devoid of context, and purged of character insight, Joyce’s epiphanies look like ascetically spatial “scenes” that decline to establish their own significance. As compressed manifestation, the epiphany makes content secondary to form’s force. Joyce arrives at this form through a concomitant diminishment of context. In both its Joycean incarnations—as Stephen Dedalus’s concept and as James Joyce’s writerly practice—the epiphany takes it characteristic shape through a sharp disjunction from the flow of narrative (or experiential) time, an abrupt de-contextualizing move. The epiphany’s descriptive attentiveness to trivial detail is thus distinct from that of earlier realist novels, in which a catalog of ordinary objects serves to evoke not their own specificity, but “the category of ‘the real,’” as Roland Barthes writes in his description of “the reality effect” (emphasis added, 148). In contrast, the epiphany promises that in marking off and rendering an object or a conversation, re-making it through representation, art in a sense liberates such an object from its quotidian uses and meanings, bestowing upon it a purely aesthetic significance. Yet Joyce’s prose-sketch epiphanies also conspicuously decline to transcend their triviality, culled as they are from the ordinary—and nearly untransformed—interactions of everyday life. For despite the connotations of revelation that cling to the notion of the epiphany, in practice Joyce did
not use these notational sketches to transfigure the stuff of everyday experience. Recent critics have forwarded arguments in this vein. Liesl Olsen and Saikat Majumdar—arguing respectively for the politically-charged centrality the ordinary and the banal in Joyce and in modernist narratives generally—have drawn attention to the everydayness of Joyce’s prose, rather than its transcendence of quotidian matters. Broadly, they aim to show how what appears to be a contraction of modernist fiction’s attentiveness might reflect an engagement with the world (for instance, with an experience of the imperial periphery), rather than a retreat into private, internal life.

But both Olsen and Majumdar are ultimately concerned with the everyday content of Joyce’s fiction, whereas this chapter argues that the form of the epiphany itself trivializes. I suggest that the epiphany represents a double move: towards aesthetic purity (which is not the same as significance, I should note), on the one hand, and towards insignificance, on the other. Stephen’s Ballast Office clock is not only un-meaningful but incidental: the thing that happens to be before his eyes at the moment of thinking. To focus attention on it is flatly incongruous. Richard Ellmann has written that the “brilliance” of the prose sketches “lies in their peculiar baldness, their uncompromising refusal of all devices which would render them immediately clear.” “Arrogant yet humble too,” the technique of the epiphany “claims importance by claiming nothing” (84). The epiphany shares this doubleness with epigrams, aphorisms, and puns, other “arrogant yet humble” short forms that foreground their smallness or brevity as well as their finality. Barthes alludes to a similar “problematic of meaning” characteristic of notational short forms. Writing on the Joyce, he explains that, like the haiku and “the Incident,” the epiphany records an “instantly meaningful event…and at the same time [there is] no
pretension to a general, systematic, doctrinal meaning.” Such instantaneous forms hold to “the constraint of no-commentary,” and “deprived of all commentary, the inconsequentiality of the Incident is laid bare” (102). Whereas, in Western literature, short forms are typically required to be “overmeaningful” (102), the epiphany is characterized by neither “success” nor “a surfeit of meaning” (101). This distinction between “instantaneous” and “systematic” meanings is instructive, even if the nature of “instantaneous” meaning remains stubbornly obscure: Barthes’ distinction begins to explain how minimal forms like the epiphany might seem to carry the promise of abundant insight even as they ostentatiously decline to provide it.

As Barthes suggests, the almost brutal concision of Joyce’s early epiphanies makes them difficult to read without the benefit of interpretive scaffolding that relates them to Joyce’s life or to his later works. Vicki Mahaffey writes, “The status of the shorter works as successful, original, or even finished compositions has always been in question.” As she puts it, “they are humourless” as well as “spare, denuded of the variable styles and elaborate contexts that make Ulysses and Finnegans Wake seem inexhaustible” and finally “derivative” (172). As a result, criticism has often ignored the manuscript epiphanies themselves in favor of the conceptual epiphany. But Joyce’s “prose bits” bear on Joyce’s later works in important ways: “The strategy of stringing together a series of formally self-contained units is essential not only to the design of Dubliners...but also the increasingly complex episodic structures of A Portrait, Ulysses, and Finnegans Wake,” where “Joyce’s technique...is in large part an imagist one” (Mahaffey 173). While none of the later works can be called “minimal,” then, they are in some sense constructed out of an engagement with minimal aesthetics. It’s not only that
some of the epiphanies were later incorporated into the longer works. Nor is it simply the case that Joyce moved from brevity to epic extension (though it’s well known that *Ulysses* expanded upon revision), for the epiphanies are not only brief or terse: they also retreat from narrative richness itself. In many cases, persons and things are depicted flatly, without access to interior states or contextual significance. In some cases, human subjectivity has been nearly expunged from fictional representation. Here is the whole of epiphany eight:

Dull clouds have covered the sky. Where three roads meet and before a swampy beach a big dog is recumbent. From time to time he lifts his muzzle in the air and utters a prolonged sorrowful howl. People stop to look at him and pass on; some remain, arrested, it may be, by that lamentation in which they seem to hear the utterance of their own sorrow that had once its voice but is now voiceless, a servant of laborious days. Rain begins to fall. (168)

Here, certain anthropomorphizing language (“sorrowful howl”) implies a speaking subject. Likewise, “it may be” in the fourth sentence alludes to the presence of the viewer/narrator who speculates about the “sorrow” of passersby. This sentence—or, to be more precise, the second part of the sentence, after the semicolon—in fact stands out from the passage for its distinctly subjective cast, which includes the speaker’s vague empathy for the “voiceless” laborers s/he imagines these nondescript people to be. At the same time, the epiphany mirrors their speechlessness. The passage relegates an inarticulate sorrow to the dog, while merely conjecturing about the humans’ “own sorrow”; if there is a thematic “point” to the epiphany, this is it. More than that, however, the speaker has an extremely limited presence in the passage, maintaining a cold, terse
tone. With the exception of the fourth, sentences are short and mostly devoid of commentary. The opening and closing sentences, meanwhile, reinforce the speaker/observer’s detachment.

The twenty-first epiphany uses a similar tack, again likening human grief to non-human speechlessness:

Two mourners push on through the crowd. The girl, one hand catching the woman’s skirt, runs in advance. The girl’s face is the face of a fish, discoloured and oblique-eyed; the woman’s face is small and square, the face of a bargainer. The girl, her mouth distorted, looks at the woman to see if it is time to cry; the woman, settling a flat bonnet, hurries on towards the mortuary chapel. (181)

In this instance, the speaker’s absence is even more pronounced. The only hint of a narrator’s perceiving consciousness lies in the two comparisons (of the girl’s face to a fish’s, the woman’s, to a bargainer). Otherwise, Joyce renders the scene in the style of “scrupulous meanness” he ascribed to Dubliners. The severe detachment of the prose again reflects the inexpressiveness of the humans being observed: both faces are described in language that forecloses emotion. The text adheres to the pair’s physical behaviors: pushing on, catching the fabric of the skirt, running in advance, settling a bonnet. The possibilities for interpreting this passage prove rather limited. If I were to hazard it, I might say something about the social construction of mourning represented in the epiphany, which is framed by the communal image of a crowd moving towards the mortuary chapel. Surely, the girl’s uncomfortable glance at the woman (her mother?) in order to determine the appropriate moment to cry indicates a muted cynicism about public displays of grief. And, reading this epiphany in the sequence proposed by the
editors of *Poems and Shorter Writings*, we can see the development of a brief arc that considers the intersection of private and public experiences of death and dying. Epiphany nineteen dramatizes a conversation between Joyce and his mother concerning his brother Georgie’s soon-to-be lethal illness; twenty follows Joyce’s thoughts in the immediate aftermath of his death; and twenty-two depicts a brief dialogue that founders on the trite expression of condolences, thereby amplifying the slight cynicism hinted at in epiphany twenty-one. Already, however, we have moved into the epiphany’s significance *for* Joyce, in the context of his life. The epiphanies themselves have no such insight to offer. Certainly, none of these epiphanies can be said to illuminate something “spiritual”—to use Stephen Dedalus’s word—about death or grief. If anything, they show us how grief can be baffling, at times, precisely because it is prosaic.

These epiphanies’ metaphors of speechless, animal suffering, and their related interest in the dynamics of crowds, are later expounded in epiphany thirty-two, which envisions “the human crowd…swarming”:

> The human crowd swarms in the enclosure, moving through the slush. A fat woman passes, her dress lifted boldly, her face nuzzling in an orange. A pale young man with a Cockney accent does tricks in his shirtsleeves and drinks out of a bottle. A little old man has mice on an umbrella; a policeman in heavy boots charges down and seizes the umbrella: the little old man disappears. Bookies are bawling out names and prices; one of them screams with the voice of a child—‘Bonny Boy!’ ‘Bonny Boy!’ …Human creatures are swarming in the enclosure, moving backwards and forwards through the thick ooze. Some ask if the race is going on; they are answered ‘Yes’ and ‘No.’ A band begins to play……A
beautiful brown horse, with a yellow rider upon him, flashes far away in the sunlight. (ellipses original, 192)

Longer and more descriptive than the previous epiphanies I’ve discussed, this epiphany looks forward to the teeming, surreal “stage” of the “Circe” episode of *Ulysses*. The passage even resembles some of the stage directions in “Circe.” Stage directions in “Circe,” too, employ strings of sentences describing figures in the crowd, all introduced with the indefinite article: “A pigmy woman... A form sprawled... On a step a gnome... A crone... A bandy child... A drunk navvy” (*Ulysses* 421-422). While the epiphany, above, hardly veers into the impossible surrealism of “Circe,” it anticipates the episode’s paratactic, additive style. Both texts use this style to evoke the wavering perceptual experience of the street: at once, an accumulation of distinct urban personalities and an undifferentiated mass. And both texts go some way towards denying or excluding interiority. If “Circe” “ends by questioning why theatrical form should authorize us in thinking something is being revealed” (184), as David Kurnick puts it, epiphany thirty-two telegraphs that *nothing* is being “revealed,” certainly not psychological content.

Joyce pares the epiphany down to observable behavior and, what’s more, obliquely attributes that behavior to mindless insect automatism. The repetition of the first line—reappearing with variation after a few sentences of description and ellipses—drives home this point: the “human crowd” has been downgraded to “human creatures,” still “swarming,” but now through “ooze,” a word with the decidedly more biological connotations of organic matter and decomposition. Thus, in a sense, the specificity of a “Cockney accent” and “heavy boots” gets submerged, and the collection of individuals is subsumed under the image of the swarm. The passage likewise subordinates the
narrator’s voice, reducing it even more drastically than the other epiphanies I’ve cited: the narrator’s only subjective interference is (potentially) in the last sentence’s judgment that the dreamlike, far-away horse is “beautiful.” Finally, several aspects of the epiphany remain utterly opaque. What is the “enclosure” to which the epiphany refers twice? The word—vaguely Beckettian in its Gallic neutrality—doesn’t convey an identifiable place, although it strongly implies fenced land (as in the Enclosure Acts of the nineteenth century), perhaps the kind where livestock graze. What is the “race” that either is or is not “going on”? The epiphany refuses to explain this, too, nor does it give any hint about why the crowd answers in both the affirmative and the negative, nor which is correct.

In each of these epiphanies, Joyce’s subtractions yield a text that is impersonal in tone and startling in its externality, as if each prose passage declined to do more than set a scene or record the bare fact of behavior. Reduced sufficiently, fiction begins to look less like a stable category, taking on a theatrical spatiality. In this sense, these epiphanies also disrupt A. Walton Litz’s neat division into “dramatic scenes” and “rhythmical prose-poems,” which Litz claims “represent, therefore, the twin poles of Joyce’s art: dramatic irony and lyric sentiment” (PSW 158). Critics have generally followed this categorization, as it reproduces the clear structural differences between the epiphanies written in play text form and those composed as paragraphs. It’s true that the epiphanies that take dramatic form—many of them written earlier, under the direct influence of Ibsen—are in many ways the most severely pared-down and the most psychologically skeptical. Nonetheless, the “lyrical” epiphanies cross into dramatic territory in subtler ways. Many obliquely invoke theatrical time and space; some include opening lines that function similarly to scenographic stage directions. Consider the first sentences of
epiphanies two, five, and twenty-nine: “No school tomorrow: it is Saturday night in winter: I sit by the fire” (162); “High up in the old, dark-windowed house: firelight in the narrow room: dusk outside” (165); “A long curving gallery: from the floor arise pillars of dark vapours” (189). These opening sentences are formatted in much the same manner as Joyce’s explicitly theatrical settings, with colons as shorthand to indicate increasing specificity of place or time. In addition, all the prose epiphanies are in present tense; their brevity means that they read as if in simultaneous narration. Finally, the “lyric” epiphanies are as likely to erase as to disclose internal states. This is not merely a matter of subterfuge versus exposure. Reading the lyric epiphanies alongside the dramatic with an eye towards their similarities instead of their differences, it becomes apparent that the epiphanies’ adherence to bare exterior description in fact indicates how irrelevant—or inaccessible—psychology remains, here. Whereas the epiphanies in dramatic form have no mechanism for directly representing thought, except as dialogue, the lyric epiphanies (which could, and sometimes do, refer to what “characters” are thinking) often reject interiority. Moreover, in many cases they remake human action as mere behavior: animal, instinctive, herd-like. This, in turn, sheds some light on the critical tendency to think of the epiphany as typically concerned with objects, when in fact the prose sketches largely portray people: the human beings of Joyce’s epiphanies are subject to an intensely objectifying vision that is intimately connected to the essential minimalism of the treatment.

To some extent, this element of the prose epiphanies carries over into *Dubliners*. The epiphanic moments in these stories are regularly opaque and banal. In “Eveline,” the eponymous young woman—beloved or seduced by the mysterious Frank—plans to
follow him to Buenos Aires, leaving behind a thankless job, a violent father, and the Dublin for which they seem to stand as a metonym. “A bell clanged upon her heart,” the story tells us near its conclusion, as Eveline is about to embark; “All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart.” If we accept two admittedly uncertain premises about the epiphany—that it can be located with the focalized character’s consciousness and that “Eveline” has one—we might be inclined to say that this moment sets up such an epiphany. Yet the story actually ends with Eveline’s “animal” incomprehension: “She set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition” (34). It thus concludes not with insight, but with a distinctly exteriorizing view of Eveline. Again, the comparison to “a helpless animal” and the negative formulation of the final sentence seem designed not only to exclude us from any reckoning of Eveline’s internal state, but even to disavow her consciousness. If this is, indeed, an epiphany, it is unlikely to divulge the meaning behind Eveline’s panic, though we may furnish her with reasons based on the rest of the story. The scene traces an abrupt shift from psychological complexity to its sudden refusal. Rather than delivering interpretive insight, the epiphany substitutes a mode of appearance for the abundant, even overdetermined, meaningfulness we may expect from the conclusion of a short story. We might think of this moment as a turn from the story’s narrative disposition towards a dramatic rendering of Eveline through the excision of psychological material: visible behavior takes the place of free indirect discursive representations of Eveline’s thoughts.

It seems appropriate that “Eveline” is a work of short fiction: it is difficult to imagine what kind of novel might elaborated from this narrative. Certainly, it would not be the novels we do have from Joyce. “Eveline” witnesses its central character in the
throes of a strange automatism; character has been emptied out or occluded. Even a non-diegetic epiphany—that is, the reader’s ironic epiphany that some critics see as the only one available in this story—is arguably foreclosed by this blank: we can read into it, of course, but that will always also be reading over it. “Eveline” and the epiphanies alike are a kind of dead end; the exploration of this dead end is arguably carried out not by Joyce, but by Beckett. And one way forward is precisely the accumulative style Joyce adopted later. Franco Moretti writes of *Ulysses*’ “modern epic” that functions through addition; for Moretti this addition yields a “world-text” that is not so much full of meaning as “truly a world of things” (159). Accumulation occurs thematically and formally: Leopold Bloom’s experience is “discontinuous, segmented. Made up of discrete, and almost absolute, moments. Made up, more precisely, of discrete and almost absolute paragraphs,” as Moretti puts it (136). But Moretti misconstrues the relationship between these “absolute moments” in *Ulysses* and those delineated by what he calls “the poetics of ‘epiphany’” (152). For him, the epiphany is its conceptual iteration and, thus, abundantly meaningful; *Ulysses*, on the other hand, goes on “for pages and pages without the slightest revelation.” “It is the true world of prose,” he continues, “detailed, regular, rather banal. …In short, a *Ulysses* without epiphanies. It is a point over which the mature Joyce parts company with his own early work, and with most of his contemporaries” (153). The epiphanies themselves obviously cast doubt on the meaningfulness of aesthetically isolated “absolute moments.” In fact, the epiphany and Joyce’s later experiments in novelistic expansion exist along the same axis: the first subtracts, as if in pursuit of the moment’s essence, and the second adds moments upon moments, as if in response to the poverty of the original discovery. Fiction, in either case, is ultimately
conceived in the same terms: as a weak aestheticization of the triviality of the everyday, either made more acutely aesthetic and more acutely trivial by distillation or made significant by accumulation. Thus, according to Moretti, *Ulysses* projects the urban intensity and diversity of Dublin through *Leitmotif*, a technique inevitably dependent upon accumulation (159). However, as Moretti’s phrasing implies, Joyce’s “absolute moments” retain a kind of self-sufficient force—something like Barthes’ “instantaneous meaning,” as empty (or inexpressive) as this kind of meaning has proven to be—that bestows on them a kind of autonomy within the longer work and from the world of the work. Another way of putting this: in Joyce’s work, there is no accumulation without implied *a priori* subtraction. The “absolute moment” must first be conceived and formalized as a unit before it can be added to others, moments upon moments, in the continuous string we recognize as stream-of-consciousness.

As a result, this initial subtraction can tell us something about how Joyce’s works simulate the collectivity that is Dublin and Ireland. *Ulysses* produces this simulation through the accretion of detail; *Dubliners* can be read as similarly collecting examples. If *Ulysses*’ structure seems to emphasize the capaciousness and variety of the whole, *Dubliners* underlines the looser coherence of its parts (as the plural title implies). More apparent in *Dubliners*, then, is the radical instability of the “whole”—that is, the “complete” or sufficient portrait of Dublin and its inhabitants—that is abstracted from concrete detail. The moment, as we have seen, is after all often rendered as nothing more than concrete detail; further, it derives its aesthetic significance in part from its *decontextualization* rather than continuity. Empty—and therefore unexemplary—such moments of individual experience resist being made into the stuff of national identity.
As I’ve already implied, it is “The Dead” that ultimately questions the coherence of Dublin (and, by extension, Ireland) as it has been presented in Dubliners. In “The Dead,” the minimalism of the epiphany stands against the richness of the narration. Though “The Dead” is perhaps Dubliners’ most complex and lyrical story, it also alternates between passages of rendering Gabriel Conroy’s thoughts, bits of conversation, and the kinds of dramatic, decontextualized scenes I’ve discussed in “Eveline” and the epiphanies. In “The Dead,” however, Joyce thematizes the representational problem of the epiphanies: the story turns on the remoteness of other minds and the unavailability of a sense of community derived from fellow feeling. This inaccessibility is most acute for Gabriel—and, if the examples I’ve surveyed are representative, for Joyce—in confrontations with gender difference: Gabriel fails, first, to connect with Lily, then with Miss Ivors, then with his own wife. And although the end of “The Dead” is frequently thought of as its epiphanic moment, an earlier scene, in which Gabriel watches Gretta on the stairs as she listens to Bartell D’Arcy singing “The Lass of Aughrim,” mirrors the prose sketch epiphanies’ frequent situation of the male writer, looking upon, aestheticizing, or objectifying his subject. In fact, epiphany three strongly recalls the physicality and the setting of the scene in “The Dead”:

The children who have stayed latest are getting on their things to go home for the party is over. This is the last tram. The lank brown horses know it and shake their bells in the clear night, in admonition. The conductor talks with the driver; both nod often in the green light of the lamp. There is nobody near. We seem to listen, I on the upper step and she on the lower. She comes up to my step many times and goes down again, between our phrases, and once or twice remains beside me, forgetting to go down, and then goes down….Let be; let be…. And now she does not urge her vanities—her fine dress and sash and long black stockings—for now (wisdom of children) we seem to know that this end will please us better than any end we have laboured for. (163)
In “The Dead,” too, a party is ending and its guests are dispersing:

Gabriel had not gone to the door with the others. He was in a dark part of the hall gazing up the staircase. A woman was standing near the top of the first flight, in the shadow also. He could not see her face but he could see the terracotta and salmonpink panels of her skirt which the shadow made appear black and white. It was his wife. She was leaning on the banisters, listening to something. Gabriel was surprised at her stillness and strained his ear to listen also. But he could hear little save the noise of laughter and dispute on the front steps, a few chords struck on the piano and a few notes of a man’s voice singing.

He stood still in the gloom of the hall, trying to catch the air that the voice was singing and gazing up at his wife. There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of. If he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude. (48)

This is not a direct adaptation of the epiphany, but its similarities to the earlier piece are striking: the matching placement of bodies; the suspended postures of listening; the man (or boy) looking at the woman (or girl), noting the details of her dress. But whereas the earlier epiphany has the two figures on roughly the same footing, both spatially and in their understanding of the moment’s significance, “The Dead” places Gabriel below his wife, unable to hear the music she hears. Meanwhile, Gabriel’s failure to hear what she hears—and, indeed, to reckon with her state of mind as she listens—gives way to his rather feeble attempt to aestheticize her (and later to make love to her) instead. Gabriel’s thoughts as we follow them, here, read awkwardly, especially the oddly belated prepositional phrase that ends the sentence beginning “He asked himself.” And it should be noted that the text holds the idea of Gretta Conroy as a symbol at a distance. It is as if she were a symbol of something but, unable to think of what, Gabriel fantasizes about painting her, imagining such a further objectification in vainly self-flattering terms.
I take this moment to be, among other things, a self-reflexive meditation on the epiphany. Gabriel’s aestheticizing vision is deeply flawed; his “epiphany” turns out to be a false one. As Gabriel later learns, Bartell D’Arcy’s “The Lass of Aughrim” recalls for Gretta the singing of Michael Furey. This knowledge in turn brings about the famous epiphany at the end of the story: as Gabriel sits lost in thought, the snow begins to fall again:

A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead. (59)

The snow, “general all over Ireland,” draws “the living and the dead,” the present and the past, into a contiguity that seems to stand for Irish national belonging, and this belonging itself is of course tethered not to Gabriel’s cosmopolitan sensibilities but the Galwegian figure of Michael Furey. This moment, we might say, is in some ways the opposite of the minimalist moment. Its overt lyricism tracks Gabriel’s thoughts. Michael Furey is the fulcrum upon which Gabriel’s vision of Ireland hinges; he is precisely exemplary, for Gabriel, of an Irishness from which Gabriel excludes himself. If Joyce was typically out of sympathy with the Gaelic revivalist nationalism represented by Miss Ivors in “The Dead,” he nonetheless allows a kind of warmth to suffuse his representation of Gretta’s lost love; it is a warmth toward “Irish folk” that the other stories in *Dubliners* arguably
lack.\textsuperscript{31} Gabriel’s silent protest against Miss Ivors’ criticism of him as “a West Briton” maintains “that literature was above politics” (31), just as Joyce himself held. Yet something of Miss Ivors’ plea that he learn of “[his] own people” in the Aran Isles motivates the end of the story, when Gabriel dreamily, ambiguously thinks, “The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward.” Michael Levenson writes that these two sides constitute “the terms of conflict that Joyce was seeking to negotiate in ‘The Dead’: on the one side, the purified aestheticism that coolly disregarded the claims of politics, and on the other side a cultural nationalism that demanded that art participate in the struggle against imperial domination” (165). For Levenson, Joyce’s articulation of a “third posture” (165) emerges from the maximalism of his work: “The characteristic strategy of his work is to bring \textit{inside the fiction} exactly those pressures that surround it in the living world. This is how ‘The Dead’ articulates a third place beyond the alternatives of nationalist politics and apolitical aesthetics: to represent them is to occupy a site distinct from them” (176). “The virtuosity of the final image in the story….stretches the panorama into a nearly incomprehensible universality” (176-177).

In an essential way, however, the story’s final moment stands in contrast to the scenes of performance, including Bartell D’Arcy’s of “The Lass of Aughrim,” scattered throughout “The Dead.” What if we consider that other occluded moment of epiphany in the story—the moment in which Gretta stands suspended upon the stairs, spellbound by music that goes unheard by Gabriel and the reader? It is, in fact, \textit{Gretta} who in that instant most resembles the attenuated “characters” of Joyce’s short prose epiphanies, as if the writing of the epiphany were actually allegorized in “The Dead,” as Gabriel imagines painting his wife’s portrait.\textsuperscript{32} Whereas the story reveals some openness to the value of
Michael Furey’s folk Irishness, it stakes its vision of belonging on the much more provisional community generated by moments of performance, in which people are drawn together in the sphere within hearing of a song. Against the Gaelic League’s call for an (allegedly) stable linguistic foundation for the Irish state, Joyce offers the smallest, most ephemeral of communities. At the same time, such a contingent community seems to pass beneath the radar of colonial control. For “The Lass of Aughrim” itself activates a broader web of connection in the story that touches both traditional Irish culture and the fabric of actual relationships between neighbors and lovers, friends and relatives.

Gabriel’s membership in this community is secondhand, at best, and neither he nor the reader can hear the ballad in the text. All the better for Joyce’s project of anti-exemplarity. The moment is not substantive or detailed: it is an elegy to neither Michael Furey nor Irishness itself. The kind of belonging it imagines arises from the contiguity—the sharing of space—engendered by performance; it is a contiguity that mirrors the unusual situation of snow “general all over Ireland.” In such impermanent arrangements, people are brought together impersonally and without violence. The scene of Bartell D’Arcy’s performance thus reveals art’s capacity for generating improvised communities that hear (or see or read) together. But it is only when art rejects the meaningfulness of such moments that it retains their suspension and fragility, as well as their paradoxical embeddedness in and isolation from everyday life.

1 “I personally feel that defamiliarization is found almost everywhere form is found,” Victor Shklovsky writes in his famous essay on defamiliarization, “Art as Technique” (1917). Shklovsky’s examples—wordplay, figures of speech, off rhythms—are notably small and local.

2 It’s worth noting that it is the emptiness of the moment in *Epiphanies* and *Jacob’s Room* that primarily interests me, here, which is why this chapter focuses neither on *Mrs. Dalloway* nor *Ulysses* nor, again, another canonical modernist text—*À la recherche du*
temps perdu—that is caught up in an excavation of the instantaneous. I would argue (tentatively) that these novels are more concerned with the plenitude of the moment than with its impoverishment.

3 Of *Ulysses*, Frank writes: “Joyce’s most obvious intention in *Ulysses* is to give the reader a picture of Dublin seen as a whole—to re-create the sights and sounds, the people and places, of a typical Dublin day, much as Flaubert had re-created his provincial county fair. And, like Flaubert, Joyce wanted his depiction to have the same unified impact, the same sense of simultaneous activity occurring in different places” (63). Although he attests to the fragmentary nature of Joyce’s technique, he maintains that this fragmentation is ultimately in service of “build[ing] up in the reader’s mind a sense of Dublin as a totality.” “A knowledge of the whole is essential to an understanding of any part, but, unless one is a Dubliner, such knowledge can be obtained only after the book as been read, when all the references are fitted into their proper place and grasped as a unity. Although the burdens placed on the reader by this method of composition may seem insuperable, the fact remains that Joyce, in his unbelievably laborious fragmentation of narrative structure, proceeded on the assumption that a unified spatial apprehension of his work would ultimately be possible” (64).

4 “To experience the passage of time, Proust learned, it was necessary to rise above it, and to grasp both past and present simultaneously in a moment of what he called ‘pure time.’ But ‘pure time,’ obviously, is not time at all—it is perception in a moment of time, that is to say, space” (68).

5 For Jameson, “the Joycean chapter is virtually the archetypal emblem of the process of episodization in modernism,” which “reflects the increasing gap between abstract categories of the Event or the Life and the concrete or microscopic experience of existential time (the notion of the ‘single day’)” (207). He speaks of a “constitutive tension between the episode and the totality…which probably accounts for the tenacious stereotype of the ‘plotlessness’ of the modern novel” (208). Jameson suggests in “The Existence of Italy” that “[m]any of the conventional descriptive features of modernism—such as style, plotlessness, irony, and subjectivity—can be productively rewritten or defamiliarized by rethinking them in terms of the problematic of artistic or aesthetic autonomy, provided this last it suitably enlarged” (201). Though the episode is, by *Ulysses*, much longer and more complex than the epiphanies, Jameson’s analysis attests to the way in which novels constituted in this way raise questions about the autonomy of the part within the whole.

6 My phrasing. Barthes: “How to pass from a fragmented Notation of the present (of which we’ve taken haiku as the exemplary form) to a plan for a novel? That is: what, of haiku, can pass in(to) our Western thinking, our writing practice?” (90).

7 Saint-Amour calls “this repertoire of necessary-impossible negotiations…encyclopedism” (186).

8 Bewes’s article describes a similar revision of elegiac life-writing in *The Emigrants*, in which the narrator declines to narrate Paul Bereyter’s life. Instead, Bewes writes, *The Emigrants* “favor[s] embodied visual and auditory experience over disembodied pontification or speculation” (19).

9 It may be worth noting, here, that in places where concrete description takes the place of a representation of Jacob’s mind, *Jacob’s Room* might be said to be reaching towards the
solution Sebald discovers and which Bewes examines: the insertion of visual material in the form of photographs which break up the text.

10 Bryony Randall divides her discussion of “dailiness” into two “strands”—“the everyday” and “daily time”—which neatly correspond to the content and structure of dailiness (2), while Liesl Olsen writes of “the ordinary as both an internal and external phenomenon” (65).

11 Zwerdling nonetheless gives a remarkably accurate (to my mind) account of the novel’s minimalism: “No incident is decisive or fully developed. Nothing is explained or given special significance. The narrative unit is generally two or three pages long and not obviously connected to the one before or after. The effect is extremely economical and suggestive but at the same time frustrating for an audience trained to read in larger units and look for meaning and coherence” (63).


13 The young Jacob is surprised by “a fish” that “darts across” a tidepool and “an opal-shelled crab” that becomes “the crab” once Jacob has lifted it from the water: “Now! Jacob plunged his hand. The crab was cool and very light” (5). Jacob stumbles on a couple rendered as “[a]n enormous man and woman”; he mistakes “a large black woman” for his nanny, only to discover “she was a rock”; he finds “a whole skull—perhaps a cow’s skull, a skull, perhaps, with the teeth in it.” In the next section, the skull is no longer an object of surprise and fascination: Jacob’s picks up “the sheep’s jaw,” which has fallen to the ground (5). It has become, suddenly, familiar.

14 “The motor omnibuses were locked. Mr. Spalding going to the city looked at Mr. Charles Budgeon bound for Shepherd’s Bush. The proximinity of the omnibuses gave the outside passengers an opportunity to stare into each other’s faces. Yet few took advantage of it. Each had his own business to think of” (49).

15 Here a very famous passage is apropos: “In any case life is but a procession of shadows, and God knows why it is that we embrace them so eagerly, and see them depart with such anguish, being shadows. And why, if this and much more than this is true, why are we yet surprised in the window corner by a sudden vision that the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us—why indeed? For the moment after we know nothing about him” (56).

16 We may, of course, disagree heartily with Heidegger’s view of animals, which is in many places clearly anthropocentric. (It might fuel our disagreement to note that his anthropocentrism cannot be disentangled from his racism: he questioned once whether Africans, plants, and animals all lacked history, maintaining with certainty at the same time that when an “airplane brings the Führer to Mussolini, then history is happening.” See Richard Polt, Heidegger: An Introduction, 155.) Heidegger indeed draws upon research on the phylum Arthropoda (both insects like the bee and arachnids like the tick) to make his point. However, my use of his terminology, here, is intended only to reflect the way Woolf seems to be using the hawk moth: her metaphor is precisely about the narrator’s unwarranted attentiveness. Elsewhere, in fact, we get an account of insects attracted to light that emphasizes their mindlessness: “…If you stand a lantern under a tree every insect in the forest creeps up to it—a curious assembly, since though they scramble and swing and knock their heads against the glass, they seem to have no purpose—something senseless inspires them. One gets tired of watching them, as they amble round the lantern and blindly tap as if for admittance” (ellipses original, 30-31).
In a particularly anthropocentric passage, Heidegger writes, “Because captivation belongs to the essence of the animal, the animal cannot die in the sense in which dying is ascribed to human beings but can only come to an end” (Qtd. in Calarco, Animal Philosophy, 18). I would note, however, that the three species of so-called “death’s head moth”—so-called for the resemblance between its abdomen markings and a human skull—are members of the Sphingidae (hawk moth) family.

Since my point is to notice how Woolf uses brevity and blank space to represent the self-containment of given moments, I’ve taken pains to cite each section in its entirety throughout my discussion of this technique.

Fully half a century ago, Robert Scholes found occasion to opine about this exact tendency in Joyce criticism. “Epiphany-hunting is a harmless pastime and ought probably to be condoned, like symbol-hunting, archetype-hunting, Scrabble, and other intellectual pursuits,” he wrote in 1964. See Scholes, “Joyce and the Epiphany: The Key to the Labyrinth?,” 66.

See Vicki Mahaffey, discussed below, on this point.

To “manifest” is “to make (a quality, fact, etc.) evident to the eye or to the understanding; to show plainly, disclose, reveal” (OED def. 1a) and a “manifestation” entails “the demonstration, revelation, or display of the existence, presence, qualities, or nature of some person or thing” (“manifestation” OED def. 1a).

Liesl Olsen’s exemplary form for Joycean ordinariness in Modernism and the Ordinary is not the epiphany but the list, which she writes “introduces a more modest ordinary style” (35). She nonetheless suggests that “Joyce is drawn to the romantic nature of epiphanic moments if only to deflate them” (35). My argument, here, is perhaps closest to Saikat Majumdar’s in Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire, where Majumdar maintains, “The very qualities of the banal object that frustrate paradigms of good, functional details characteristic of normative modes of knowledge production are also that ones that respond to the destabilized ontology of modernism” (44). For Majumdar, “the banality of daily life and the desire for aesthetic transcendence are not so much polarized as held in a mutually enabling dialectic” (38).

For Barthes, the haiku represents the “exemplary form of the Notation of the Present=minimal act of enunciation, ultrashort form, an atom of a sentence that notes…a tiny element of ‘real,’ present, concomitant life” (23). It is the literary form an instant of time takes, which Barthes likens to fleeting—but revealing—actions: gestures or a bell ringing (49). Meanwhile, “the bell is anti-interpretive: it blocks interpretation” (78). The epiphany, he suggests, is an intermediary short form, “between haiku and narrative,” as it were (88).

Barthes explains later in the lecture that the first kind of meaning is a “writerly” “moment of truth,” that “is not an unveiling” but “on the contrary, it’s the sudden bursting forth of the uninterpretable, of the last degree of meaning, of the after which there’s nothing more to say” (107). It is therefore unsurprising that the haiku, the exemplary form for this type of meaning, is both poetic and virtually as compact as literary texts get.

I am using the sequencing from Poems and Shorter Writings, here, and not Joyce’s numbering (which isn’t apparent in the published text).

The surviving epiphanies in dramatic form—where Joyce denotes a setting in brackets, formats dialogue as a play text would, and, often, includes parenthetical stage directions—are: 1, 4, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 22, 35, 38, and 40. Epiphanies five, twenty-six, and thirty-six mix prose with dramatic dialogue.

In epiphany one: “[Bray: in the parlour of the house in Martello Terrace]” (161). In epiphany fifteen: “[In Mullingar: an evening in autumn]” (175).

See Daniel R. Schwarz, “A Critical History of The Dead,” which suggests that “In many stories, including ‘The Dead,’ the reader’s epiphany is different from the character’s epiphany; indeed, the reader’s epiphany is an awareness of the limitations of the character’s epiphany” (66). The Dead, ed. Daniel R. Schwarz (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1994).

Several of the dramatic epiphanies depict Joyce’s embarrassment at misunderstandings and miscommunications regarding gender. See, for example, epiphanies 4 and 5.

Ellmann reports that Joyce absorbed the fracas over John Synge’s The Playboy of the Western World, which caused a riot at the Abbey Theatre in February 1907, while Joyce was working on “The Dead” in Rome. In a letter, Joyce surprised his brother, Stanislaus, by siding with the Irish nationalists who objected to Synge’s “slander on Ireland” (239). “Some of his difficulty in beginning [‘The Dead’] was due, as he said himself, to the riot in Dublin over [the play]. Synge had followed the advice of Yeats that Joyce had rejected, to find his inspiration in Irish folk, and had gone to the Aran Islands” (245). During his stay in Rome, Ellmann notes, “Joyce became aware of the change in his attitude towards Ireland and so towards the world. He embodied his new perceptions in ‘The Dead’” (243).

The notion of Gabriel as a stand-in for Joyce is well-trodden territory, of course. Gabriel’s appearance is not unlike Joyce’s; like Nora Barnacle, Gretta is from Galway; and Michael Furey was based on Nora’s Michael Bodkin. See Ellmann, 246-247.

Gabriel’s attitude that “the west [of Ireland] is savagery…is being challenged by the song… Aughrim is a little village in the west not far from Galway. The song has a special relevance; in it a woman who has been seduced and abandoned by Lord Gregory comes with her baby in the rain to beg for admission to his house” (Ellmann 248).
Chapter 3. Beckett and Minimalist Sociability

Nothing preoccupied Samuel Beckett more than minima. If nothingness itself concerned him more, he well understood that only its approximation was possible in literature, which must work in the freighted medium of language. Experiments in subtraction shaped Beckett’s writing in profound and varied ways, especially after World War II. The subtractive process marks every aspect of his work: its grim humor and stark wit, its austere style and scant content, its economy of literary means, whether dramatic or fictional. Ironically, Beckett’s vaunted negativity has been extraordinarily fertile critical ground for about half a century, now. Despite his insistence on failure in his art, his work continues to be widely read and frequently staged; despite his ambivalence about philosophical explanation, his writing has been attached to every important philosophical movement of the twentieth century. The well-known details of his life—heroic spying for the French Resistance; permanent self-exile in Paris; the “catastrophe” of the Nobel Prize, the money from which he gave away—have only added to Beckett’s image as a modest but exacting genius. This image is inescapability linked with his signature style.

So it will come as no surprise that I will call Beckett’s work “minimal,” here, and Beckett, in some sense, a “minimalist.” Even occasional readers of Beckett will recognize him in the designation. Beckett scholars, meanwhile, will probably find it absurdly obvious as a general descriptor and contentious to the extent that it draws a connection with the (always contentious) Minimalists in the plastic arts. But although we have been casually terming Beckett’s work “minimal” for some time now, critics have remained almost studiedly indifferent to what it means to describe it this way.² Beckett’s writing is
not *uniformly* minimal—his minimalism is not of a monolithic type—but his critics have grown accustomed to thinking of it in this way. Indeed, in the most common critical narrative, Beckett’s work simply became “more minimal” over the course of his career. Even this uncontroversial assertion rests on a problematic assumption of intentionality linked to progress (albeit negative progress). It rests, in other words, on the idea of Beckett as a genius, as *sui generis*. Beckett told his biographer, James Knowlson, that he came to an important epiphany about his difference from Joyce while visiting his mother in Foxrock just after the war:

> I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one’s material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realised my own way was impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding. (319)

According to critics, the fulfillment that followed upon this insight was as elegant as the insight itself: recognizing his “own way,” Beckett pursued a program of subtraction that found diverse forms for literary impoverishment. His writing became progressively sparer, more austere. So the story goes. Nevermind that this critical narrative reinstates a heightened idea of firm authorial control, in which Beckett brings a clear vision to perfect fruition; nevermind that, if we attend to what he says here and elsewhere, it’s clear that “lack of knowledge” extends to the subject, itself; nevermind that this is precisely the vision of authorship Beckett’s minimalism was so often challenging. In other words, critics have hardly stopped to ask why it seems to be so difficult for criticism to take seriously the minimal claims of his work: its insistence on failure, on its own emptiness and insignificance. As others have pointed out before, Beckett somehow makes his critics
feel comfortable, in spite of it all. Ironically, this questionable comfort has much to do with the way in which Beckett’s minimalism attempts to cancel art’s authority by showing the smallness and weakness of art in a fully “administered” world and, too, the associated uselessness of criticism.

Where Joyce ultimately wanted to do more with less, Beckett embraced an artistic protocol of doing less with less. This choice marks a break from modernism’s priorities. The preceding two chapters chart a kind of pre-history of literary minimalism, finding its inchoate traces in texts of apparent richness. In James, I have argued that we can see a latent subtractive aesthetic at work in the varied renunciations of The Ambassadors: the visible refusals at the level of plot, the elaborate prose surfaces that disavow the illusion of depth, the novel’s relentlessly inconclusive interrogatives. The second chapter turns to the early fiction of Joyce and Woolf. In it, I suggest that distillation marks not only the development of modernist poetics, but the floating narrators and absent plots of modernist fiction. Yet the chapter stresses that the stylistic austerity of works like Dubliners and Jacob’s Room is always ambivalent. By Ulysses and Mrs. Dalloway, Joyce and Woolf are anxiously engaged in an effort to disperse the challenge to artistic authority embedded in representational spareness. Herein lies Beckett’s difference from these earlier figures. Beckett intuited that there can be no serious turn away from representation that doesn’t entail a renunciation of art’s capability and authority. His art no longer makes the same kind of claim to usefulness and relevance. As Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit write:

It is not that Beckett, like Racine in Bérénice or Flaubert in Un Coeur simple, wishes to show how much he can make out of so little, or to prove that
significance in art does not depend on significant or large subjects. On the contrary: each time the paltry and uncertain elements of *Worstward Ho* show the slightest inclination to solidify into a reliable and potentially meaningful representation, the narrator will lament this perverse tendency of language to approximate truth… (2)

Though Beckett’s experiments are precisely crafted, they aren’t exercises in concision or in finding “le mot juste.” (*Worstward Ho* cheekily overturns that project, looking for the wrong word instead.)

In this chapter, I examine Beckett’s revolutionary turn from a form of writing that does more with less to one that does less with less. Through scale, Beckett’s work alters its manner of address. Rather than changing the terms of art’s internal sufficiency, he embraced its fundamental *insufficiency*. This break from the world can be seen as the ultimate autonomy from it, but in Beckett’s work it engenders a kind of paradoxical worldliness. The work’s representational insufficiency draws it back into a different context: that of the reader’s encounter with it. Rather than having an experience of what this thing we’re looking at, listening to, or reading is *about*, we’re suddenly having an experience of its form. This is, in a sense, a return to form as a method of estrangement and defamiliarization; however, I argue that Beckett’s writing goes further than the move of defamiliarization. His late fiction uses processes of subtraction to structure what comes after defamiliarization, generating sensations of spatial expansion and of dialogic exchange. These elements, it should be noted, are more typically associated with the public reception of theater than the private experience of reading. In this way, Beckett’s late fiction finds new ways to think about social magnitude. This fiction tries to discover
methods for understanding the inhuman scale and vast complexity of the events of the twentieth century by tethering the human scale of fiction to the widening arenas of public discourse and exchange that are represented by an imaginary theatrical situation.³

Beckett’s late fiction upholds the collective underpinnings of this situation⁴ without binding itself to an actual, delimited physical space. Since fictional representation is necessarily scaled to the individual reader, it can imagine how the private experience of reading might be contiguous with public experience; this contiguity is established through the late fiction’s spatial, theatrical form.⁵

Thus, Beckett’s minimalist project finds its most dialectical and literary expression in fiction, the focus of this chapter. This is not to say Beckett’s plays are not “minimal” (and it is certainly not to suggest they’re not political). I simply want to point out that this minimalism is not always of a strictly literary order. In Beckett’s plays, the process of subtraction yields dramatic economy in a variety of forms. Waiting for Godot begins with Estragon’s announcement, “Nothing to be done,” and this double-entendre on “nothing” might as well serve as the play’s prologue and manifesto. What follows is not really nothing, but clowning and conversation that refuses to coalesce into something more conventionally significant. The theatrical joke of Godot, of course, is in its citation of how an audience behaves in the theater: waiting for the drama to begin. Later plays would pare down drastically from there. Some are stripped almost to their linguistic essentials, as in the broken monologue of Mouth in Not I. Others are closer to a purely theatrical minimum. Act Without Words I & II are mimes. Quad, “a piece for four players, light and percussion,” dispenses entirely with dialogue, too. The play, Breath, has no words and no onstage actors: only a repeated cry, rising faint light, recorded
respiration, and a stage “littered with miscellaneous rubbish,” as if after the actors’ disappearance (399).

These two courses for dramatic minimalism—the linguistic and the non-linguistic—correspond to the two invariable components of Beckett’s fictional minimalism: the voice and space itself. The voice appeared as the naked root of novelistic composition as early as *The Unnamable* (1958). It was not until the 1960s in Beckett’s later prose that bare situations in space emerged as literary form’s minimal condition. *Breath* achieves this endpoint, but it also has a tenuous relationship with its literary dimension. It is primarily a performance—that is, a specific *mise en scène* and an exacting sonic presentation. As such, the human actor is implied though not present. But even if it points to this absence through the physical components of speech, *Breath* in its staged iteration eschews language entirely. In short, my contention is that *Breath* represents a non-literary minimalism. (There is a family resemblance between *Breath* and visual minimalism—not so much minimalism’s large-scale industrial objects, but Robert Morris’s rope arrangements, Eva Hesse’s disordered piles, and Robert Smithson’s “non-sites,” as well as sound and performance art.) It can therefore tell us little about how literature becomes minimal. By contrast, Beckett’s late fiction shows us something crucial about specifically literary minimalism: its dialectical force. Literary minimalism must struggle to do less with the unavoidable richness of words; it therefore flickers between shape and matter, form and formlessness, abstraction and concretion. Beckett’s late prose attempts to discover its minimum with words, from within style, syntax, and genre. It must be acknowledged that there is something resolutely strange and probably futile about this choice: like making quiet with a full orchestra. Beckett drastically
reduces the matter of fiction, almost completely excising the things we recognize as the elements of narrative, but these texts remain moored in a narrative tradition. Indeed, the continued presence of this tradition in its wasted and impoverished state seems be the ground required for the experiment. Beckett’s late fiction is thus both superlatively fictional—a distillation and purification of prose fiction—and a challenge to the boundaries of genre. From within the parameters of fiction, it strains towards a condition of spatiality and theatricality.

Theodor Adorno is undoubtedly in the background of this argument. In “Trying to Understand Endgame,” he writes, “These Beckettian situations which constitute his drama are the negative of meaningful reality” (130). “Beckettian absurdity,” he writes later, “is already achieved as a result of the immanent dialectic of form. Not meaning anything becomes the only meaning.” (137). According to Adorno, negation is the mechanism by which Beckett’s plays—and all art—come to reveal the appropriative violence of the social world. Resisting meaning, and therefore resisting use, art achieves autonomy from this world and, thereby, stages its critique of what exists. Art is “the other” of administered society. In this chapter, I try to discover how Beckett’s negations strain towards new and better conditions of sociability beyond the constraints of meaning and identity. His minimalism is elusive: it is detectable more in the tensions of the work that in any achieved form. We must therefore take Beckett’s word for it that his efforts are crucially failed and, as he suggests, begin again from there. To use the French pun of Beckett’s title: failure is comment c’est in art—how it is—and also the place “to begin,” commencer.
1. *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*

The “Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit” are often read as providing an account of the processes of negation at work in Beckett’s aesthetic. Ironically, this is the rare Beckett text that is securely *about* something: both the discrete “somethings”—paintings—of Pierre Tal Coat, André Masson, and Bram Van Velde, and the more elusive “something” of representation itself. Of the critical writings Beckett produced, “Three Dialogues” is unique for having been written during the same period as his most famous works. In 1948, Beckett and Duthuit began corresponding on the topic of painting with the aim of publishing their conversations. This was the same year Beckett started *En attendant Godot*. In March, 1949, he began composition of *L’Innomable*. By June, using the material generated in their letters, Beckett was writing “Three Dialogues.” It appeared in *Transition* magazine in December of that year.⁶

One might even read “Three Dialogues” as the completion of a kind of turn in Beckett’s writing life that began much earlier. His first forays into fiction were written under Joyce’s heady influence. Early texts like *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932) and *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934) were allusive and linguistically dense. They were also in English. After the war, Beckett’s writing took a notable turn: he began to write almost exclusively in French, the better to write “sans style,”⁷ and to subtract, moving away from Joycean prose. (Recall the realization in Foxrock, quoted above.) “Three Dialogues” is not about literature, but the language Beckett uses in regards to his own work recurs in it. Curiously, however, it was written in English, despite the fact that the correspondence between Beckett and Duthuit was carried out in French and *Transition* was a bilingual magazine. Does this decision reflect an incomplete distancing between
author and voice? It’s difficult to say. Certainly, “Three Dialogues” seems obliquely relevant to Beckett’s experience in the 1940s, which was one of literary failure and intense privation after the more acute danger of the war itself. Continuing to write “after Auschwitz,” as it were, Beckett must have felt with some personal urgency the most famous line of “Three Dialogues” stating his preference for: “The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express” (556).

It’s tempting to hear in these words Beckett’s ultimate statement about his own art. And, for my purposes, the statement vividly captures an aspect of his particular minimalism: he may have been aiming for nothing, understanding at the outset that it was unattainable. Nonetheless, however, the line does not rightly belong to Beckett himself, but to Beckett’s character, B, who is discussing painting in “Three Dialogues” with D, Duthuit’s representative. Though the content of their exchanges was culled from actual correspondence, it’s important to keep in mind that “Three Dialogues” is a highly crafted text. The letters reveal a Beckett hesitant and unsure of how to go about explaining his position. He wrote to Duthuit, “I am no longer capable of writing [in] any sustained way about Bram [van Velde] or about anything. I am no longer capable of writing about [sur]. So, if you are not altogether sick of me, you are going to have to ask me questions” (Letters 141). In the published text, this and other hesitations have been transmuted into something altogether more dramatic: a crafted stiltedness, a willingness to go silent, comic miscommunications and frustrations. “Three Dialogues” discards its epistolary origins entirely, preferring a particularly dramatic iteration of philosophical dialogue. Rupert Wood writes, “[T]he drama we are presented with in the Three dialogues is a kind
of endgame of aesthetic theorizing; it is a drama which is neither serious nor entirely playful, but one where playfulness and seriousness continuously infect one another.” The co-infection he describes is equally one of genre. Composed at exactly the moment of Beckett’s first major dramatic effort, Godot,10 “Three Dialogues” is as much a record of his experiments in this area as it is evidence of his attitudes about literature. In Beckett’s plays, characters prone to philosophical soliloquy are always vulnerable to deflation; in “Three Dialogues”, B delivers the soliloquys and therefore B goes in for puncturing. Each dialogue ends with B unwilling or unable to go on, having failed to convince a skeptical D of his view. The awkward exits and silences that ensue owe something to the vaudeville acts that influenced the comically circular exchanges of Godot and Endgame. Thus, “Three Dialogues” makes fun of its own philosophical content. Beckett, in the figure of B, both asserts and does not assert, for the simple reason that he is always both character and author. In this way, dramatic gestures serve to undermine B’s authority and disperse the authority of the text itself.

In “Three Dialogues,” ideas fail; or, alternately, there are no ideas, per se. Processes of abstraction are mimicked, then undone, continually. B is engaged in a hopeless effort to describe an impoverished art, a failed art, an art that somehow evades the “occasion” of representation that has always been at the center of painterly practice. “The history of painting,” he says, “here we go again, is the history of its attempts to escape from this sense of failure, by means of a more authentic, more ample, less exclusive relations between representer and representee” (563). As Ruby Cohn puts it, “The dehiscence of the subject-object relation is the thread (and the standard) of B’s critique, although ‘object’ is sometimes ‘occasion’” (182). B suggests that Bram van
Velde “is the first [painter] whose hands have not been tied by the certitude that expression is an impossible act,” whose painting is “bereft, rid if you prefer, of occasion in every shape and form, ideal as well as material”; he hesitantly affirms that van Velde’s painting is “inexpressive” (561):

D—One moment. Are you suggesting that the painting of van Velde is inexpressive?

B—(a fortnight later) Yes.

It’s a joke, of course, about inexpressiveness. Called upon to speak, B holds out for a fortnight before he makes his reply. But his refusal to speak would have been expressive, too, in the end.

The joke thus points to what is perhaps the central problem of “Three Dialogues”: once B begins to describe van Velde’s art as “without occasion,” that absence begins to become the new occasion.

“Whatever I say,” Beckett writes in a letter to Duthuit, “I shall seem to be locking him [van Velde] back into a relation. If I say that he paints the impossibility of painting, the lack of all relation, subject, object, it will look as if I am putting him into relation with this impossibility, this lack” (Letters 141). B is likewise emphatic in the second dialogue, on Masson, that “the void” is just another occasion. “What is the good of passing from one untenable position to another, of seeking justification always on the same plane?” B asks (558). For him, an attempt to “paint the void” amounts to nothing more the expansion of painting’s expressive power—a justification, perhaps, for its threatened existence. He wishes to begin from a position of a priori non-relation, rather than merely setting up new objects to which painting might make itself relevant.
Whereas “painting the void” seems to be in some sense about meaninglessness—and therefore still about meaning as a condition of art—B speaks of van Velde’s art as if it had no truck with meaning at all. In fact, looking at van Velde’s painting, he seems to wonder whether it is really art at all. He says: “For what is this coloured plane, that was not there before. I don’t know what it is, having never seen anything like it before. It seems to have nothing to do with art, in any case, if my memories are correct” (563). This may sound like art’s renewal—making it new (again)—and no doubt in a sense it is. But it is also a plea for a kind of dialectical tension within the artwork. On the one hand, B describes a failure to transcend the quotidian object world, a failure to prompt absorbed looking of the kind that a critic like Michael Fried so values (“It seems to have nothing to do with art”). On the other hand, the art B describes seems to achieve intense autonomy. As B says near the end:

…[V]an Velde is…the first to submit wholly to the incoercible absence of relation, in the absence of terms or, if you like, the presence of unavailable terms, the first to admit that to be an artist to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living.

(563)

This “absence of relation” clearly precedes the artwork; indeed, it is the thing that has threatened all painting. Previous artists have labored to “coerce” a relation into the artwork; van Velde begins with submission to the hopelessness of this project. Here, we are close to Adorno’s reading of autonomy in *Aesthetic Theory* as that which both endangers the continued existence of art in a social world intent on use and exchangeability and, at the same time, that which serves to indict this context through
radical negation. “Three Dialogues” uses the term “failure” roughly to capture this negation, with important differences: failure implicates both the artwork and the artist, and suggests the artist’s imbroglio in a process that can be never be completed—a process that may even be paradoxical, given the way in which “failure” imports the problem of intent. We may reasonably ask, that is, whether it is possible to decouple an artwork’s failure from its maker’s intentions. Isn’t intentional failure necessarily success?

In other words, Beckett’s use of failure in “Three Dialogues” tentatively imagines an art that, as its signature aesthetic move, abdicates its authority and its specialness as art. Needless to say, were it to complete this move, it would no longer be art; therefore, this art is impossible. The contradictions at work are too grave. But this is precisely the condition to which minimalism aspires. To do less with less, rather than more. To say nothing, to mean nothing, while fulfilling the obligation to speak. “Three Dialogues” makes these claims through its form as much as its content. In van Velde’s painting as in “Three Dialogues” itself, the effort to set aside relation and to resist meaning and aboutness is an incomplete process of subtraction, the asymptotic approach to nothing. Importantly, this process seems necessarily to yield a dramatic situation. In painting, intense autonomy teeters at the brink of objecthood; the more intense the autonomy, the more inevitable its collapse into objecthood. To put it perhaps too simply, the more we are prompted to approach a painting as a strange “coloured plane” that “has nothing to do with art,” the more we are torn between immediacy and distance. Giving this tension a different emphasis in Minimalist art, Hal Foster writes: “In short, minimalism appears as a historical crux in which the formalist autonomy of art is at once achieved and broke up,
in which the ideal of pure art becomes the reality of one more specific object among others” (emphases original, 54). 11

Meanwhile, in “Three Dialogues”, dramatic form allows Beckett to say something about Van Velde with the force of failing to say anything at all. In the letters, Beckett pleads that he has nothing to say. To B’s call for “the expression that there is nothing to express” in “Three Dialogues”, D responds: “But that is a violently extreme and personal point of view.” And B has no answer. Or rather, typographically, B’s reply is empty:

D.—But that is a violently extreme and personal point of view, of no help to us in the matter of Tal Coat.

B.—

D.—Perhaps that is enough for to-day. (556)

Is B speechless, sulking, distracted, angry, absent? Is the moment comic (as it is usually read) or pathetic? The blank answer gives us no clues. It is a superlatively theatrical technique: if we rest, for a moment, on that blank, it prompts us to imagine how it could be performed. It insists on a “B” who is present not to speak, either by principled refusal or abject puzzlement. The appearance of the empty response depends upon the dramatic structure of the text. The blank is thoroughly textual, thoroughly written, but fully cognizant of the possibilities engendered by the play text qua play text: the silent reading, evocative of a verbal recitation—or in this case heard silence. Tongue-in-cheek, the blank demonstrates the very thing B has just called for: nothing, expressed. In this way, it affirms and undoes the paradox of the mysterious “obligation to express”; the emptiness of B’s answer suggests both an evasion and a fulfillment of the obligation, since it takes the form of speaking, of dialogue, without the content. Or, alternately, with the positive
content of a blank: silence as refusal, embodying what B elsewhere in the dialogues calls “my dream of an art unresentful of its insuperable indigence and too proud for the farce of giving and receiving.” (This last phrase ought to remind us of Beckett’s plays, which are full of characters tragically/heroically invested in just such a farce.) And “Three Dialogues” always returns to a scene of failure. The first dialogue thus ends on a note of enigmatic breakdown, as does the second, and the third. The second dialogue, “Masson,” ends with B’s exit, “weeping” (559). The last words of the third dialogue are, in B’s words, “I am mistaken” (563).

In this way, “Three Dialogues” alludes to the way in which meaning’s failure always seems to have the effect of casting us back into a situation. It’s not just that the performed failures of the text seem to be where the explication of aesthetic failure meets with the greatest success. B’s is a weary critique, a hesitant one, and inconclusive. In B’s blank response, the intersection of minimalism, failure, and theatricality comes to light. “Three Dialogues” becomes more than merely “a defense against a rational apprehension of the aesthetic” and “a projection of the indeterminacy of experience” (Oppenheim 95). Its dramatic dimensions urge the reader out of such individual paradigms for reading. Not only does “Three Dialogues” participate in the “overall dialogic rhetorical system of Duthuit’s Transition” (Hatch 49), its theatricalization of philosophical dialogue suggests proliferating dialogues, across languages and beyond the purview of the avant-garde magazine. Minimal form makes this expanding encounter possible by attempting to imagine it beyond the notion of a privileged identity. “Three Dialogues” is thus a demonstration of the possibilities—a premonition even of the political possibilities—of minimalism, avant la lettre.
2. *Fizzles*

In Beckett’s letters to Duthuit, the predicament detailed in “Three Dialogues” takes yet another shape: the ubiquitous question of subject-object relation is figured as “the state of being in front of” and “the definition of the artist as he-who-is-always-in-
front-of” (140, 139). During the 1960s and 1970s, Beckett’s fiction grappled with this problem through the amplification of surround. Three-dimensional situations—narrow rooms and corridors; boxes and coffins; spaces constituted by the echo of footfalls—supplant the two-dimensional positions of looking implied by “the state of being in front of.” And, whereas “the state of being in front of” implies the absorbed gaze bestowed by the subject on the object and the durational aspect of this looking, these fictional rooms imply instead the sharing of space. Spatial form supersedes the temporal form of narrative. In some ways, Beckett’s *Fizzles* have more in common with the “stanzaic rooms” of verse—the sonnet’s “scanty plot of ground,” for example—than they do with short fiction, the theory of which tends to be linked to temporal unity.¹²

For Ruby Cohn, “the unstable aesthetic that links Beckett’s Van Velde with the crisis in Beckett’s own fiction” is apparent in the way in which “the occasion, and even the subject, gradually dissolves into the writing process of the protagonists” (183). As early as *The Unnamable*, this “dissolving into” the process of writing produces a fiction distilled into voices. This is an aspect of Beckett’s writing that has a long critical history. In Hugh Kenner’s early study, for instance, he writes: “‘All is a question of voices,’ reflects *The Unnamable* more than once…this is strictly true of character in fiction, but he means more than that. He means too that man is man by virtue of speech, and that all
speech is an echoing of echoes” (167-168). The speaking voice, telling stories—“Devised deviser devising it all for company” (Company 33)—has long been thought of as both the origin of narrative and its barest iteration. Critics have before suggested that Beckett’s fiction very often crosses into monologue as a result of its reduction to the voice. Enoch Brater’s 1994 book, The Drama in the Text: Beckett’s Late Fiction, makes a powerful argument that the “rediscovery of the aural possibilities of language for the instants of communion they offer” is the animating force behind Beckett’s later fictional experiments (6). “Paring down his fictional enterprise to what a story has always been—a voice speaking aloud—Beckett has in The Unnamable reached a point where his real energy as a writer of prose is about to begin,” he writes (8). “This may be prose, but it has life of the theater in it” (11). Indeed, much of Beckett’s prose was destined for other media, especially the theater, in short order. Yet critics have not asked whether it might be odd to explain Beckett’s use of the voice as simply a return to the origin of stories, given the distinctly humanist tenor of this hypothesis (as Kenner’s version makes apparent). In this account, the voice is at the origin of the story, as the story is at the origin of the human. The point is complicated by the influence of the technology of radio on Beckett’s oeuvre. And if The Unnamable reduces the matter of fiction to a voice, later fiction is interested in the voice not only as the medium for a story, but as a sound among sounds, human and inhuman.

Much has been written about the voice that anchors Beckett’s most minimal fiction; critics have less often considered the process of paring down that yields this endpoint. This neglect is especially interesting in light of the kinds of assumptions that support it: the storytelling voice is taken as the “natural” root of every fictional
enterprise, and it is therefore not necessary to interrogate the manner in which Beckett arrives at it. However, although Beckett’s fiction after *The Unnamable* often projects a vocal telling, there is undeniable friction between the techniques he uses to accomplish this and the other features of the prose. These texts often defy categorization: as we will see, they don’t function comfortably as either stories or monologues. It’s not at all clear that most of Beckett’s prose pieces would be any good staged. (Can anyone who has read *The Unnamable* really wish to see it one day acted out?) It is a further puzzlement that, as I have suggested above, the distillation of dramatic representation takes many forms in Beckett’s work, from the more strongly verbal minimalism of Mouth’s broken speech in *Not I* and the internal monologue of *Rockaby* to the non-linguistic minimalism of *Act without Words I & II* and *Breath*. Why, we might reasonably ask, does Beckett’s subtraction in prose tend so irresistibly to a consistent form, especially when his dramatic experiments are multiform? Once we begin to question the assumption that the voice is the “natural” and “human” form for fiction, the choice begins to look like an indictment rather than a confirmation of that assumption.

But my point, here, is that the process of subtraction at work in Beckett’s fiction is just as salient as its outcome. Attending to this process allows us to see that the ambient noise—or silence—surrounding the voice is perhaps as salient to our reading of Beckett’s late fiction as the speaking voice itself. Another way to put this is to suggest that Beckett’s fiction in its desiccated form still conjures a more robust iteration of the genre; thus, focusing exclusively on the outcome (the voice), we miss how the starting point is continually evoked. As much as it might appear to have departed from narrative, the fiction I will discuss in the remainder of this chapter has not forgotten itself entirely. The
late short story “neither” is particularly extreme example: it consists of ten lines, written out as if in one-line stanzas. Its stanzaic appearance parallels the evocation of space in the lines themselves: “To and fro in shadow from inner to outershadow//from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither//as between two lit refuges…” (258). The spatial dimensions of the piece speak to the philosophical split between self and other, subject and object, and the zone—neither—between. The story also clearly evokes physical space, too, and not merely as a rather banal metaphor for the philosophical problem. “Neither” uses blanks as a visual metaphor for its title. Beckett’s insisted that it should be included with his fiction. This insistence that it be read as the thing which it is least like suggests the coincidence between the spatiality described in the piece and that inscribed on the page. It further suggests that the brevity of Beckett’s short fiction is only the most obvious element of subtraction and not necessarily the most important. Plot, character, setting—all these are drastically reduced. To think of these works as “narrative” at all is to stretch the category of narrative beyond recognition. Yet it must be acknowledged, too, that they would not look as “minimal” as they do if it were not for their participation in this category. Minimalism, here, is a method for both consolidating and dispersing the sense of genre. Beckett’s most superlatively constrained prose pieces at once fulfill and undo the parameters of fictional form. These are failed narratives—or narrative failures—rather than something else entirely; however, I will argue that the generic confusion that arises from this failure serves to alter the scale of these pieces’ address. They are pared down precisely in order to discover a form of narrative commensurate to vast scale. “Neither” is not a piece that uses an intimation of voice, but
it has the same effect: in both cases, linguistic parsimony serves to open the space around what is said.

Only the scantest residue of plot, character, and setting is detectable in Fizzes (Foirades). The eight pieces that make up Fizzes were written over the course of the 1960s and 70s—first in French, then translated by Beckett into English. The subtly onomatopoetic title indicates an expansion of the late fiction’s sonic repertoire beyond the realm of the voice. “Foirades” means something like diarrhea in French; it can also mean a series of farts or, figuratively, bad argumentation. The word Beckett chose as a translation, “fizzles,” is remarkably apt: it denotes “the action of breaking wind quietly,” of “hissing or sputtering,” or “a failure or fiasco” (OED def. 1a, 1b, 2). These titles thus allude to both the willed insignificance of the prose—its slightness, uselessness, and vulgarity—and to the tethering of these pieces to the functions of the body. Being often blind or in darkness, the “characters” reckon the places they inhabit by footfalls, the dragging sounds of their crawling, the pattering of bodily rhythms. The fizzles are often spatially delimited by the reach of these sounds and their protagonists’ hearing. Substituted for narrative, then, is a relatively static situation: a body or bodies, positioned in three-dimensional space.

Several of these stories are self-conscious—even parodic—about their manipulation of narrative elements. In the first “fizzle,” “He is barehead,” an unnamed “he” moves forward in the dark. We are told he is “as destitute of history as on that first day,” but in fact his history is merely limited to the story itself; it is the history of his groping through its maze-like setting. “Little by little his history takes shape.” It comprises “occasions passing rightly or wrongly for outstanding, such as the straitest
narrow, the loudest fall, the most lingering collapse, the steepest descent” (227). “He is barehead” imagines a story of threadbare material, but it also parodies the conventions of narrative history as a strategy for discerning the relative significance of events and persons. The story makes no claim to its own significance, and the “he” at its center is as inconsequential a hero as one can imagine; at the same time, however, the story wrings a kind of poignancy from this irrelevance. In this way, it effectively makes thematic material of its minimalism.

“Afar a bird” approaches the problem of fictional composition differently, but it is similarly self-conscious about its relation to a tradition. It is in first person, and the narrating voice speaks mostly of its creator. “Someone divines me, divines us, there’s what he’s come to, come to in the end” (232); and, “He seeks a voice for me.” We have moved into self-reflexivity: the voice in the narrative speaks of how it has come into being. “For to end yet again” subtracts further: the unspooling of the story is radically curtailed into a beginning that is also an ending, repeated interminably. The sentences proceed almost undifferentiated, the prose pressed as flat as possible. There are no commas. “For to end yet again skull alone in a dark place pent bowed on a board to begin” (243). The opening phrase is repeated over and over along with others, like “grey cloudless sky.” The effect is of the minimum of style: there is no change and little contrast.

Sepulchral skull is this then its last state all set for always litter and dwarfs ruins and little body grey cloudless sky glutted dust verge upon verge hell air not a breath? And dream of a way in a space with neither here nor there where all the footsteps ever fell can never fare nearer to anywhere nor from anywhere further
away? No for in the end for to end yet again by degrees or as though switched on
dark falls there again that certain dark that alone certain ashes can. Through it
who knows yet another end beneath a cloudless sky same dark it earth and sky of
a last end if ever there had to be another absolutely had to be. (246)

Here “For to end yet again” stops, having systematically interrogated the artificiality and
arbitrariness of endings. There is no transcendent end according to this fizzle; all endings
are “by degrees.” In a sense, “For to end yet again” has undermined the fictional
“frame”—the demarcation between regular discourse and the literary artwork, which is
defined in part by its beginning and ending—though the “last state” and “a last end”
gesture to the very definite end-stop. Meanwhile, the questions that appear in the text,
and the “No” that follows them, evoke at least two voices in dialogue.

Perhaps the most important fizzle for my purposes is “Closed Place,” the second
shortest of the eight, which establishes a direct link between its reduced form and its
illusion of spatial dimensions. According to the John Calder edition published in 1976,
“Closed Place” (titled “Closed Space” in this edition) is a condensed version of a much
longer work in French begun 1968 and finally abandoned.”15 Its French title, Se voir, is,
as Ruby Cohn points out, less “clearly referential” than the English (304). It means “to
see oneself,” which carries both the senses of literal seeing and reflexive imagining; it
can also mean “to see one another” and “to be obvious.”16 Cohn links this title to the
“concentric circles of ditch and track” that “mirror the human eye” in Se voir. One of
Beckett’s most acute interpreters and almost surely his most comprehensive, Cohn also
rather remarkably suggests that “Se voir may be Beckett’s bleakest vision.” “At least it is
mercifully brief,” she points out (304).
“Closed Place” arguably lacks a human subject. There is a speaker, perhaps—one hesitates to call it a “narrator”—whose presence is almost nil. Everything is dead. The sentences are terse, often incomplete, and punctuated only by periods. The text describes a “place consisting of an arena and a ditch.” There is a “track” between the two, “following the ditch all the way along,” and this track is “just wide enough for one.” The place may be closed because “beyond the ditch there is nothing.” Indeed, we are told: “All needed to be known for say is known. There is nothing but what is said. Beyond what is said there is nothing. What goes on in the arena is not said” (236). The “brilliance of the bright lots…does not encroach on the dark. Adamantine blackness of these. As dense at the edge as at the centre” (237). “Closed Place” seems to warn, then, that there is no approaching the “dense…edge” of blackness. We might take this as a spatial allegory for the process of making textual meaning. If we are accustomed to ascribing an unreadable darkness to the center of a text, “Closed Place” cautions that that density goes to the very edge. Although it only concerns “what is seen,” “Closed Place” attests that there is nothing to see. In this way, it provokes an inconsistent attention. There is nothing to see, for there is only what is said; yet the text tells us only what is seen. The reader’s attempts to imagine the edifice draw her into closer attention, until that attention is frustrated by the lack of coherent guidelines. The juxtaposition of concrete description and the most severe abstraction drives a kind of motor for disrupting the reader’s distance from the work. Does “Closed Place” provide a clear representation, reproducible as a mental figure that can be rotated, like a complete object, in the mind? Or does “Closed Place” depict an impossible, disjunctive place? The text insists, after all, that this place is “not for imagining.” This instability within “Closed Place” is therefore repeated in its
form, which lacks the stable coordinates of a perspective. As a result, “Closed Place” itself confronts us as something less like a story and more like an object, without an “inside,” a subjectivity.

We might also read the line “there is nothing but what is said” as an assertion about the purely textual nature of “Closed Place,” which refers to nothing outside itself. What follows suggests a slight alteration, in that it insolubly elides the inside and the outside of the text: “Beyond what is said there is nothing. What goes on in the arena is not said.” These two sentences are logically incoherent. Strictly speaking, this suggests an impossible effort to cordon off not only the outside of the text, but its inside, too. Meaning in the sense of linguistic signification and in the sense of contextual information are both held at bay, but the recourse to a spatial imagining suggests in incomplete severing between text and world.

The world is not represented, per se, in “Closed Place,” but it is evoked. We can read the imagery, here, as a Dantecan hell, but it resonates just as powerfully with the historical trauma of the Holocaust. There is a “bed divided into lots” perceptible in the ditch, with “so many bodies visible on the bed.” “Arena black vast,” the text calls this place, “Room for millions.” Even this last sentence alone can only evoke the gas chambers. The place, too, is “not for imagining”: both unimaginable and a sacrilege to imagine. The terse, almost scientific language and the emphasis on counting (“Sum the bright lots”) recalls the language of technical efficiency surrounding the so-called “Final Solution.” “Sum the bright lots,” the text stipulates; however, such summation seems impossible, even repugnant. At the same time, these operations of language are continually undone: there is no calculation where there is no possibility of perception—
no seeing commensurate to this place—from which to begin. The French title, *se voir*—to see oneself, to see one another—might remind us that this fragment of prose is in some sense about witnessing and its impossibility. “Room for millions. Wandering and still,” it reads, “Never seeing never hearing one another. Never touching” (236). There is a painful literal sense in which these lines remember how countless human beings can enter the same room and, if it is a gas chamber, never see nor hear the ones who came before or after. Even more, it underlines the impossibility of “seeing one another” from the vantage point of history. As “Closed Place” cryptically asserts: “All needed to be known for say is known. There is nothing but what is said. Beyond what is said there is nothing. What goes on in the arena is not said” (236).

The compressed shape of “Closed Place” and its interest in scale point to the other ways to write about mass death. It conspicuously eschews the catalogues of names; the inventories of personal items left behind; the photographic images of countless, nameless dead. In imagining vast scale, we are often drawn to documentary detail, realism, richness, comprehensiveness; intuitively, aesthetic magnitude and complexity is the obvious medium for conveying historical magnitude and complexity. Instead, “Closed Place” is brief and austere, non-representational and difficult—in a word, minimal—and these aesthetic attributes show how unequal any account must be to such inhuman scale, while drawing a tenuous thread between the vastness it implies and human scale.

There is still a voice in “Closed Place.” It’s audible in the sound effects of the text and in tiny remnants of tone. Marjorie Perloff isolates several elements of poetic structure in “Closed Place.” Likening the “sound structure” to that of a telegram, Perloff notes that there is a great deal of anaphora, patterns of alliteration and assonance, and two-stress
rhythm sentences. “Phonemically, then, Beckett’s text is a kind of ‘closed place,’ the rhythm of recurrence being carefully foregrounded.” There are also the slightest traces of tone in “Closed Place.” For instance, the dead leaves on the track are “a reminder of beldam nature” (237). Even in such a short text, we have been thoroughly habituated to the lack of reference that this “reminder,” with its archaic and tonally significant “beldam nature,” fully violates. “Beldam” can mean “a grandmother,” “a great-grandmother, or still more remote ancestress” (OED def. 1); it can also carry the connotation of “a hag; a witch; a furious raging woman” (OED def. 3). The most recent example on the OED dates to 1857. Thus, “a reminder of beldam nature” suggests a style and tone—the minimal residue of a subjectivity.

Further, an examination of Beckett’s manuscript revisions to the translation of “Closed Place” shows a careful navigation of language that suggests bodily scale or human presence. The tenth sentence, “Between the two skirting the latter a track,” comes after nine clinically impersonal, rigorously internally logical sentences. But Beckett evidently dithered over the present participle “skirting”: it began as “bordering” in the first two versions (MS 1550/19, 20) before being altered to “skirting” in the final (MS 1550/21). Of the two, “skirting” carries with it the stronger implication of human form and motion. Likewise, the “place” in the first sentence, “Closed place,” was substituted for “space”—a word with fewer connotations of human presence or constitution—in the first draft. (Place might be thought of as a specific space given a certain boundary or conceptual purpose by human intervention.) In addition, whereas older uses of “space” had primarily temporal uses (see OED def. 1.1-5, “denoting time or duration”), “place” has no such etymological roots. This change thus also suggests a further emphasis on
stasis and spatial extension at odds with duration. Finally, there is an explicit mention of human scale: “Just room for the average sized body.” However, Beckett removed a repetition of the word “average” two sentences later, changing “Bigger than average it has to curl up” to “Bigger it has to curl up,” as if to keep the referent of the body in check. Though subtle, these modifications reveal the shaping influence of bodily scale on the dry language and compressed form of “Closed Place.”

“Closed Place” is about inhuman scale, but it has in mind human scale: the human voice and the human body. It holds out the possibility of the kind of mutual seeing its French title implies. Its abstract, spatial imagery, mirrored in its cognate form, suggest to the reader his or her co-presence—not only with the narrator (if there is one), but with the dead. The description of the “arena black vast” works as a metaphor for reading as a particular form of shared spectatorship. Crucially, “arena” has three relevant senses: it denotes the zone where conflict and bloodshed takes place (OED def. 1-2), “a style of play production in which the stage is so positioned in the auditorium that it is surrounded by the audience” (def. 5), and “any sphere of public or energetic action” (def. 3). Through a process of subtraction, Beckett generates a kind of fiction stripped to empty space, without a privileged vantage point.

If “Closed Place” holds out the possibility of mutual recognition, however, the last sentence refuses this emergent encounter. The track, we are told, is “Just wide enough for one. On it no two ever meet” (237). This is an apt metaphor for the condition of fiction: the tracks of a narrative are travelled alone, with only the illusion of the narrator’s company. Unlike the theater, fiction is a place where “no two ever meet.” The vanishing insinuations of a voice are at odds with the constraints of narrative in “Closed
Place”—and this is precisely how “Closed Place” manages to have “room for millions” of readers even as it is closed to all.

3. Worstward Ho

In 1983, roughly two years after Beckett began Worstward Ho, he wrote in a letter, “I find I cannot translate Worstward Ho. Or with such loss that I cannot bear the thought.” Of the three later “novels” Beckett assented to calling a “trilogy,” and which are now published together under the title Nohow On, both Company (1980) and Worstward Ho (1983) were first composed in English. The middle text, Ill Seen Ill Said (1981) began its life as Mal vu mal dit and was translated by Beckett himself into English. So, although he had earlier in life told friends he would never again write in English, in fact he ended up switching back and forth at will. Worstward Ho is an exception in his body of work in that it seems to have been an English text through and through.

We will see the many reasons for that shortly. But first I want to point out how different Worstward Ho is in this respect from the Fizzles of a decade earlier. The latter were written first in French and translated for the purposes of Beckett’s collaboration with Jasper Johns—though if “collaboration” suggests mutual influence and shared labor, the making of the artist’s book that resulted from their association deserves the designation in only the most limited way. (“Although he respected Johns’s work,” Beckett’s biographer writes, “Beckett did not warm to the man” [578].) Yet the handsome and rare object that came out of this parallel labor is the product of many hands: as a paragraph in French and English explains in detail at the end of the text, those
hands were not only Beckett’s and Johns’s. Someone made the ivory paper; someone set
the type; someone else constructed the accordion-folded biding. Most of this was
accomplished “by hand,” as the book so clearly advertises, with special emphasis on the
locations in France where each element was produced. Only three-hundred copies were
printed, each housed in a fine linen box with an indigo tassel and signed by both Beckett
and Johns.

This book reveals a history of Fizzles that isn’t visible from within the bleak
confines of the prose itself: its circulation in art markets as a coveted object and in
museums and galleries as the focus of exhibitions on Johns’s print-making technique, of
which Foirades/Fizzles is seen as a magnificent example. This circulation, particularly
across the Atlantic, is reflected in the book’s dual interests in translation and the body.
It’s thoroughly bilingual: each text appears in the original French, followed by its
English translation, and it has title pages in both languages. Many of Johns’ etchings
suggest the relationship between linguistic translation and the movement across art forms.
Between the French and English texts of the first piece, “J’ai renoncé avant de naître/I
gave up before birth,” Johns has placed an image across two facing pages with the
English words for several body parts on the left and the French on the right (fig. 7).
Figure 7. Foirades/Fizzles. Source: Beckett Collection, University of Reading.

On each edge is a zone of gray, darkening towards a demarcated area of near-black at the center. At the left edge, the gray is composed of painterly strokes; at the right, of fine, close-hatched lines. In the center, the density of the fill has been generated by these same means, but on opposite sides (ink-like at left center, paint-like at right center). The effect is of complex overlapping fades, of which the text is a part, or panels on which it is super-imposed. Whereas the correspondence between English and French words on the page implies a simple translation, the image suggests a more enigmatic transformation, emphasizing the shape and texture of the letters. Though the texts in the *Foirades/Fizzles*
make references to body parts and processes (as does the title, of course), John’s images
do not directly invoke the texts. Instead, this image seems to assert the visual elements as
impediments to translation—or as themselves rival translations.

The life (or afterlife) of *Fizzles* has much to tell us about the way in which texts of
this shape and size were apt to circulate. Johns’s illustrations—and his very participation
in the project—reveal how *Fizzles*’ form suggests itself to transposition. Brief and
linguistically austere—recall Beckett’s use of French to write *sans style* and without
metaphor—they seem to be ready-made little packages for carrying across the boundaries
of language or medium. As Johns’s image, above, shows, the use of “simple” words can
generate at least this illusion: an English-speaking child learning French from a picture
book will see the nouns listed in Johns’s image. Further, these texts are, in a sense, at
home with the illustrations of a thoroughly American artist and a proto-Minimalist.
Despite the lack of real collaboration, the juxtaposition between text and image works.
They’re not merely linguistically mobile, they’re aesthetically adaptable. At least that’s
how they appear. Finally, their circulation as a high-end commodity ought to remind us
of the easy movement of Minimalist objects in art markets.

Beckett worried about a “loss” in translating *Worstward Ho*. He had no such
worry about *Foirades/Fizzles*, perhaps not because a loss was avoidable (translation
always, in any case, involves some shortfall), but because *Foirades/Fizzles* could, in a
sense, be enlarged by its losses. That is, as I have already argued, it seems to have built
into it an interest in addressing a multitude of readers. *Worstward Ho*, in contrast, is more
thoroughly rooted in English. Its title references a whole swath of aesthetic objects from
the Anglophone world with names relating to *Westward Ho*. The most salient of these are
the play, *Westward Hoe* (Webster and Dekker, 1607), and the Charles Kingsley novel, *Westward Ho!* (1855). However, there were also several films with this title, including a 1935 American Western starring John Wayne. Of more relevance to Beckett’s choice of title, perhaps, is the 1861 mural by Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, which was popularly known as *Westward Ho!*, and which took its full title (*Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*) from the final lines of George Berkeley’s “On the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America”:

> Westward the course of empire takes its way;
> The first four acts already past,
> A fifth shall close the drama with the day;
> Time’s noblest offspring is the last.”

Beckett may have been familiar with neither the Leutze mural nor the Berkeley poem, but he was most certainly familiar with the Irish Bishop Berkeley’s philosophical works. Indeed, Ackerley and Gontarski write that *Film* (1964) had Berkeley’s “Esse est percipi” as its “motto” and that “the tradition behind…‘Three Dialogues’ includes Berkeley’s decidedly undramatic *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*” (50). It is provocative to think that Beckett may have been familiar with this poem, especially since it likens the “course of empire” to the acts of a play.

Whether or not this was indeed a reference point for *Worstward Ho*, it’s clear that Beckett’s text had in mind the protocols of imperialist expansion and the doctrine of improvement that speciously rationalized it. Indeed, through its title, *Worstward Ho* compares colonial to linguistic expansion, explicitly challenging the notion that “Time’s noblest offspring is the last” in its obdurate anti-progress towards the worst. Thus,
Beckett’s sense that *Worstward Ho* could not be translated may have had as much to do
with the link between translation and expansiveness as it does with the material of the
prose. Or, rather, the prose may have taken its distinctly English cast in order to resist a
species of authority and autonomy that lends itself to translation. Intent on the worst,
Beckett may have avoided translatability as a kind of positive capacity inherent in a
text—a capacity *Foirades/Fizzles* evidently had in spades.

The issue of translation thus points towards a difference in the minimalism of the
earlier *Fizzles* and the later *Worstward Ho*. This difference has much to do with the two
texts’ negotiation of genre, the ways in which they are differently anchored in a tradition
of fiction. In many ways, *Company, Ill Seen Ill Said*, and especially *Worstward Ho* all
return to “Three Dialogues” idea of failure as one route towards lessening; in *Worstward
Ho*, worst and least are closely related. Fictional representation, here, is taken to its bleak
apotheosis (or nadir). *Company* ends with a single word, “Alone,” set off from the
paragraph and centered in the blank space below it on the page. Though these three texts
are considered “novels,” none of them exceeds fifty pages. All are composed of language
that is stripped-down, but curiously playful and punning. In *Company*, the style is
movingly lyrical at times; its second-person sections, in particular, are prone to flights of
memory that are rendered in a fluid present-tense. S. E. Gontarski writes of the three
works that make up *Nohow On* as further examples of Beckett’s “closed space” texts.
Unlike *Fizzles*, however, these novels don’t function through the “reduction of narrative
time to points of space” (xxvi). Nonetheless, they are keenly attuned to spatial
dimensions, this time reconceived as a function of the body’s own proportions: the
number of paces it can crawl, how far its voice can reach into the dark. *Company* was
originally started as a short work entitled “Verbatim” or the “Voice” (Knowlson 574).
“A voice comes to one in the dark,” it begins, “Imagine” (3). It proceeds to reckon its
world in relation to how the “one” perceives this voice.

_Fizzles_ was destined for the medium of the artist’s book; in contrast, _Nohow On_
has had a significant afterlife in the performing arts. Both _Company_ and _Worstward Ho_
were quickly transformed into theater pieces by the experimental performance troupe
Mabou Mines, under the direction of Beckett’s friend, Fred Neumann. This rapid
conversion is unsurprising, given the appetite for Beckett’s work at this point. But it also
reflects the dialogic, dramatic form of the texts in _Nohow On_. These texts confine
themselves to the space within earshot of a speaking voice, as it were; they immediately
suggest the realization of such a situation. This is not to say that staging these texts,
particularly _Worstward Ho_, would not have been a challenge. The lack of palpable setting
and character is, of course, a difficulty for theatrical productions, too. Neumann’s
solution was to make an open grave the center of his set; he stood in it to deliver many of
the lines of the text. As reviews noted, this technique made him look “like a
Shakespearean gravedigger.” The allusion was not entirely misplaced: “Beckett’s
inspiration for _Worstward Ho_ lies in Edgar’s speech of _King Lear_: ‘The worst is not so
long as one can say,/This is the worst’” (Cohn 375). Indeed, I would argue that _Lear_, with
its merciless excavation of “nothing” (introduced in Cordelia’s exchange with her father
in Act I, Scene 1) and the worst, may be _Worstward Ho_’s most important precursor.
Lear’s tragedy has its roots in his misguided faith in “opulent” speech and well-wrought
expression; _Worstward Ho_ takes this lesson to heart.
This is, of course, to suggest that *Worstward Ho* thinks back to a dramatic, rather than fictional, precedent. In fact, the genre of *Worstward Ho* seems almost incidental. It is organized in disconnected paragraphs—short blocks of text, really—that appear on the page surrounded by ample blanks. As such, these ninety-six “paragraphs” really look like neither paragraphs nor stanzas. The spaces between blocks of text suggest pauses, and in the (very slight) syntactical shifts between them, they hint at multiple voices. Poetic devices abound in *Worstward Ho*. The many levels of repetition indicate the strict reduction of phonological means in the text, which favors sonic similarity over variation or difference. Cohn writes, “Verbally, *Worstward Ho* is a tour de force, constituted mainly of monosyllables in rhyme and off-rhyme: *go/no, on/gone, soft/left/rift, knowhow/nohow*. The quasi-palindrome ‘gnaw-on’ summarizes both the global plot and the individual events, but the goal of this ‘on’ is for all to be ‘gone.’ The alliterative *worse/words* is Beckett’s most reductive insult to the language about which he is ever skeptical” (376). It turns out that the strongest repetitions in *Worstward Ho* are those associated with the sounds in the title and the first line (“On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on” [89].) “O,” “s,” and “n” are the predominant sounds, with significant “h” now and then. (We can see how Beckett would think it untranslatable.) Of course, other sounds enter, but they are generally confined to a single paragraph or even a single repeated word, as in the unusual introduction of a conspicuous “f” in the “faintly” of this passage:

Faintly vainly longing for the least of longing. Unlessenable least of longing.

Unstillable vain last of longing still. (109)

This “f” seems obscurely authorized by the introduction of the sound in “so far”; it then proliferates, with “vainly” playing on the repeated “faintly.” Keeping to this formula, *Worstward Ho* makes the severe limitation of means visible: the “f” sound is withheld enough to seem unusual or surprising, here. Elsewhere, it carefully aligns “worse” with “less” through minute adjustments, accomplished equally by sense and sonic similarity:


As Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit put it, “If, as we believe, there is great pleasure to be had in reading *Worstward Ho*, it is a pleasure that comes from linguistic leastness itself: from the lulling musicality of repetition, as well as from the unavoidable breakthroughs to a sense that has nothing to do with the world’s occasions, a sense that is merely the play of a contentless comparativeness” (84). The sense of this passage is surprisingly lucid: The text dictates that the absolute least that is achievable (the “unlessenable least”) is equivalent to the “best” worse.

the “obscurantist designs of Blanchot-style criticism” (12), Casanova analyzes

*Worstward Ho* as an example of a process of abstraction. For Casanova, this is what makes Beckett a true revolutionary: his creation of a “mathematical formalism,” an abstract literary syntax. She isolates in *Worstward Ho* the production of linguistic rules within the text, signaled in most cases by its many imperatives. (“On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on,” it begins. “Say for be said. Missaid. From now say for be missaid” [89].) From there, Casanova explains the radicalism of this project:

> The equation stated and solved by *Worstward Ho* therefore provides (strict) irrefutable proof of a formidable formal ambition, without precedent in the history of literature, of a logical, combinatory option in the service of a new literary form. *Worstward Ho* is not the evocation of a nihilistic stance or the representation of ontological tragedy, but a kind of ultimate poetic art: Beckett delivers his theory of literary abstraction in practice and elaborates an abstract text to the very point when he explains how he writes it. … With *Worstward Ho* Beckett created a pure object of language, which is totally autonomous since it refers to nothing but itself. (26)

Casanova makes this last point about the “totally autonomous” nature of the experiment in service of a formal argument without, I think, fully endorsing it elsewhere. In subsequent chapters, she addresses what she calls the “why” of Beckett’s literary revolution; the answer, for her, can be nothing other than historical, and has much to do with Beckett’s experience of Irishness and exile. Casanova later acknowledges a “bond between language and world” that can’t be fully severed: “The abstract writer does not
naively organize a pure, empty form. He only accomplishes his formal revolution by coming to terms with the necessary, ‘uncancellable’ bond between language and the world. Or rather, he invents abstraction in literature by striving and moving towards an impossible extinction of meaning” (103). Finally, at the end of her analysis, Casanova suggests that “Beckett was an iconoclast in the strict sense: he fought against literary academicism by producing an anti-literary literature” (105). She goes so far as to liken Beckett to Marcel Duchamp. However, she doesn’t investigate the implications of this final assertion to her argument that *Worstward Ho* achieves a perfectly hermetic state, as if smashing atoms in a vacuum.

In fact, Beckett exploits the tension between elements of fictional representation (the memories and “naked images” which Casanova finds ultimately puzzling) and pared-down, dramatic functions that work to cancel the literariness and autonomy of *Worstward Ho*. Casanova’s comparison to Duchamp is apt: *Worstward Ho* has much in common with a Duchampian, avant-garde strain of theatricalized modernism. She acknowledges that “The most formalist is not necessarily the most disembodied” work (18). In “the pure space of the text” (21), as she calls it, “We might even imagine…a kind of dialogue, a text with two voices, with questions and objections from an alter ego who is rather sick and tired” (22). But this recognition of the traces of dramatic structure in *Worstward Ho*—its intimations of voice and dialogue—don’t complicate her autonomy thesis. In fact, I argue that these intimations—products of Beckett’s process of reduction—draw the text back into the world, if not the world back into the text. This is Beckett’s resolutely anti-representational method for making art worldly.
Worstward Ho recurs to the bare theatrical situation of voices in dialogue to sustain its subtraction. As I have suggested, and as the title intimates, the text is dense with “o” assonance; it is the primary component of the on/no dyad that is so important in Worstward Ho. Once, the narration makes the non-semantic, verbal component of “o” sounds apparent: “Ask not if it can go. Say no. Unasking no. It cannot go. Save dim go. Then all go. Oh dim go. Go for good. All for good. Good and all” (emphasis added, 98). This “Oh” acknowledges the oral/aural quality generated by such insistent play with sounds, connecting the spoken “o” unnoticed as non-semantic material to the “Oh” that signals grudging assent or surprise. In addition, Worstward Ho sometimes stutters and interrupts. “But but a shade so as when after nohow somehow on to dimmer still,” it objects (108); “So far far far from wrong” (110); and, “Whenever said said said missaid” (109). There is logical content to this stuttering. “Whenever said said said missaid” might be rephrased, “Whenever this text said ‘said,’ imagine it said ‘missaid.’” Substitute for yourself, it advises, to both itself and to the reader. Interruptions function similarly:

Where then but there see now— (93)

The void. How try say it? How try fail? No try no fail. Say only— (96)

Next try fail better two. The twain. Bad as it is as it is. Bad the no— (99)

Next— (100)

In each of these instances, the next paragraph begins, “First x”: “First back” (93), “First the bones” (96), “First back on to three” (99), “First how all at once” (100). Thus, the text simulates two voices in exchange, correcting one another, the second reigning the first in when it becomes too eager to go “on.”
The questions in *Worstward Ho*, like those in “Three Dialogues”, become a method for saying less while keeping on. “Add others. Add? Never. Till if needs must,” the exchange goes (101); “adding,” meanwhile, seems to be not strictly necessary as long as the interrogative is there to begin things again. (In the letters leading up to “Three Dialogues”, Beckett told Duthuit to ask him questions when he could no longer say anything “about” anything.) “Blanks for nohow on. How long? Blanks how long will somehow on? Again somehow on” (105). “Whose words?” one voice wonders at one point. “Ask in vain,” it replies (98). In my first chapter, I argued that the interrogative itself has a particular relationship to the reticence of minimalism. To reiterate that point in brief: Questions tend to be short and, in a sense, empty. Too much detail dilutes the interrogative force of questions, which point forward, instead, towards the response. While Beckett doesn’t use free indirect discursive questions as James does, he does make plain the way in which the content of questions resists interpretation. Questions are evasive, suspended. It’s not that they short-circuit interpretive methods entirely, but that they underline the ostensibly subjective nature of meaning. Of even more importance for Beckett, however, is the mimetic nature of questioning. Direct questions tend to function through processes of mimicry, mirroring, and revision. Assumptions and examples are restated. In everyday conversation, we use questions to show we have been listening; for this reason, they often require mirroring our interlocutors’ comportment. Questions require of the questioner both distance—objectivity—and closeness, familiarity. As I put it in my first chapter: “Questions are essentially social. This applies even to those we pose to ourselves. The constructions ‘I ask myself’ and ‘I question myself’ make this clear: questions place one in relation to oneself as an other. Since they bring us into a
relation with otherness, then, questions make us vulnerable; they constitute a plunge into contradiction and chaos; they open us to rejection, invalidation, thwarted desire.” In Company, interrogatives function as “company,” for the “devised deviser” (33). They serve an analogous purpose in Worstward Ho, creating from within stark abstraction a kind of community. Often, they provoke disagreement: “Where were skull to go? As good as go. Into what then black hole? From out what then? What why of all? Better worse so? No. Skull better worse” (115-116). The “no” of this last dialogue emphasizes both the plurality of voices and their simultaneous fusion with the text’s phonological schema. Thus, the refusal and negation of the word itself is caught in an undertow of something like aesthetic unity.

In the many times “no” is heard in Worstward Ho (“nohow on” contains both a “no” and its mirror image), we might hear the reversal of Molly Bloom’s famous “yesses.” Worstward Ho is in many ways the opposite of Joyce’s extroverted art—which allows Worstward Ho to attempt to envision the minimal condition of sociability, as it were. “[T]his resolutely narcissistic art always performs the conditions of the human subject’s entry into both its natural environment and a human community,” Bersani and Dutoit write. “This is done, moreover, without Beckett taking into account any identifiable environments or communities” (90). For Beckett, this performance requires at the “meremost minimum” objects in situation. Beckett constructs this situation early on. The third paragraph instructs: “Say a body. Where none. No mind. Where none. That at least. A place. Where none. For the body. To be in. Move in. Out of. Back into. No. No out. No back. Only in. Stay in. On in. Still” (89). The necessity of this situation, consisting only of the conjoined body and place, is repeated immediately in the next
paragraph: “First the body. No. First the place. No. First both” (90). Although the voices admit that this situation is “all of old”—that they are “sick of both”—the passage strikingly confirms that it is impossible to get rid of. “The body again. Where none. The place again. Where none. Try again. Fail again. Better again. Or better worse” (90).

For this reason, Beckett’s minimalist fiction so often resembles theatrical form stripped to its spatial components. The attempt to do away with the material of art—with art itself—comes first; the spatial, theatrical form is its result. Conceiving of art in this way, Beckett evades the problem of representation as he imagined it at the time of “Three Dialogues”. If the “occasion” was defined, then, as “the state of being in front of,” performance implies a more flexible arrangement. From this unstable perspective, objects are no longer so susceptible to appropriation. In this light, Beckett’s fiction can be thought of making a different kind of address, in conceiving of itself as a public object. If Beckett’s minimalism looks in some respects more “purely” formal and hermetic than, say, the novel in its psychological richness, in its striving towards the condition of theater Beckett’s minimalism ironically evokes the most chaotic, open, and social of genres. It thus also retains its force as a kind of anti-art, in that Beckett’s fiction suggests that the encounter with form itself is essentially an encounter with the world.

1 In a famous piece of correspondence with critic Sighle Kennedy, Beckett suggested two provocative points of departure for any discussion of his work: The “Naught exists just as much as Aught” of Democritus (from which we get “Nothing is more real than nothing” in Murphy) and “Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis” (“Where you are worth nothing, there you should want nothing”) of Arnoldus Geulincx. See The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett, ed. C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski .

2 One significant book-length attempt to describe Beckett’s minimalism is Enoch Brater’s monograph, Beyond Minimalism: Beckett’s Late Style in the Theater, which endeavors to draw a clear line between Beckett and visual Minimalism, the “abstract and by some measure even geometric art form,” which he says, “at best aim to do more with less and less.” He writes:
It now seems to me that Beckett’s plays demonstrate an aesthetic which goes far beyond the limited and often dehumanized sphere we recognize in the chilling reticence of minimalist art. In these late plays Beckett reaches for something far more concrete: what remains in the theater, live and palpable and real, after so much has been taken away, how much doesn’t have to happen onstage for a lyrical dramatic moment to expand and unfold. (ix)

Thus, while Brater’s argument is contiguous with my own in terms of how it shows Beckett’s drama as “genre…under stress,” it is at times anxiously engaged in an effort to rescue Beckett from any association with “the chilling reticence of minimalist art” (3). This hesitation seems to have to do with a need to retain the artist’s authority when speaking or writing about Beckett. It’s notable, too, that Beyond Minimalism is focused entirely on Beckett’s plays, though Brater’s later book, The Drama in the Text, transfers some of these interpretive moves to the late fiction.

3 Here, I am turning on its head Martin Puchner’s argument about the “anti-theatricalism” of Beckett’s drama. Puchner sees many of the innovations of Beckett’s theater and his directorial techniques as methods for causing the “disintegration of actors and their senses” (169). For him, Beckett participates fully in an old high-modernist project of anti-theatricalism in fiction and drama. I suggest, here, that Beckett’s fiction at least is closer to the avant-garde pole of modernism that Puchner himself characterizes as theatrical. Modernist anti-theatricalism, Puchner argues, was a response to “fear of the masses and the public sphere. By the same token, the avant-garde’s embrace of the theater and of theatricalism can be taken as a sign of the avant-garde’s greater affinity to populism and the masses” (9). For Puchner, “The perceived affinity between the theater and the public sphere is a key factor in the formation of a specifically modernist anti-theatricalism. Due to this affinity the theater, or the act of theatricalizing other art forms such as music or sculpture, threatens to restore art to the public sphere” (11). Working in prose fiction, Beckett begins from a position of a priori “literariness,” the elements of which he endeavors to pare down in later years towards a more theatrical version of fiction. Thus, my argument indirectly implies that Puchner has painted Beckett a shade too modernist. He was less wary of a theatricalized politics of mass culture than Puchner makes him out to be, and indeed embraced avant-garde techniques in his late fiction.

4 In a way, I am arguing that, surprisingly, it is Beckett’s fiction that most powerfully affirms the mutual constitution of the theatrical and the political. The theater provides an ideal metaphor for a political space in which the power to speak is afforded to every person who enters the theater’s provisional collectivity. In thinking of theater in this way, I’m drawing on Jacques Rancière’s use of theatrical metaphors for his vision of dissensual politics. As Peter Hallward writes, “Perhaps the most fundamental, and illuminating, dimension of Rancière’s anarchic conception of equality is that which relates to theatre—in both the literal and metaphorical senses of the term. Rather than defining equality as a principle order or distribution, Rancière presents it precisely as a pure ‘supposition that must be verified continuously—a verification or an enactment that opens specific stages of equality, stages that are built by crossing boundaries and interconnecting forms and levels of discourse and spheres of experience.’ As Rancière describes it, thinking is more a matter of improvisation than of deduction, decision or direction. Every thinking has its stage, every thinker ‘plays’ or acts in the theatrical sense.
In particular, every political subject is first and foremost ‘a sort of local and provisional theatrical configuration’” (110-111).

5 Joseph Frank’s essay, “Spatial Form in Modern Literature,” defines “spatialization of form in a novel” as when “the time-flow of the narrative is halted: attention is fixed on the interplay of relationships within the limited time-area.” This “limited time-area” allows the reader to see what is happening simultaneously in a geographic area. Frank’s primary example is the county fair scene in Madame Bovary, in which the reader learns what is happening on the street and above it at the same time. (The article, originally printed in Sewanee in 1935, is reprinted in Essentials of the Theory of Fiction, ed. Michael Hoffman and Patrick Murphy). My use of spatial form takes a particularly theatrical cast, having something to do with these texts’ intimation of places like performance spaces. David Kurnick’s Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel examines analogous spatializations in 19th-century novels. He argues that one formal device these novels use to generate theatrical spatializations is parabasis, “a coming forward” where “someone inside the novel ‘breaks character’ to gesture beyond his immediate diegetic context” (14). This is certainly apropos for my reading of Beckett, as is Kurnick’s sense that novelistic “spatializations should be recognized as…adding a further imaginary spatial dimension” to the universe of the novel. “[T]he referential texture of the fiction is warped not by an awareness of its textuality but by the sudden interpolation—‘between’ the reader and the diegetic action, as it were—of a hypothetical theatrical context for that action. If under normal narrative protocols the reader is ‘alone’ with the diegetic universe, in these moments the intimacy of novel reading is aerated with an idea of public space: we suddenly sense not only the crowd of spectators of which we are an imagined part but also the architectural fact of the space we imaginarily share with them” (15). In Beckett, the process is decidedly more abstract: the rest of the fiction has been stripped away, leaving only the “coming forward” of the voice. Direct references to theatrical texts and contexts are almost completely absent (though the short prose fragment “Closed Place,” which I will discuss, refers to an “arena”).

6 See the chronologies laid out on pages 69 and 109 of The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1941-1956.

7 “[A]sked in 1956 by he began to write in French, SB replied, ‘Parce qu’en français c’est plus facile d’écrire sans style.’ …As [he] later told Charles Juliet (Conversations, 143), it was a new language for him, ‘still with an aura of unfamiliarity about it,’ which ‘allowed him to escape the habits inherent in the use of a native language.’ …To Herbert Blau he suggested that French had the right ‘weakening effect’” (The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett 206-207).

8 “[T]he burden of his unserious argument in the dialogues is that this kind of critical reconciliation between expression and inexpression, between something and nothing, is a premature reconciliation that shields us from the ferociously unthinkable relation between the nameable and the unnameable… Beckett’s writing…does not constitute nothingness made palpable, but rather performs an endlessly failed reaching for a nothingness which gives rise to the work,” Peter Boxall writes in “Nothing of value: Reading Beckett’s negativity” (31).

9 As Martin Puchner has pointed out, such dialogues already entail the protocols of closet drama, even when their theatricality is rigorously suppressed (as in the polemically anti-theatrical dialogues of Plato). See Puchner, 14. Three Dialogues falls somewhere
between the two poles of closet drama, restrained and exuberant, that Puchner describes. He defines restrained closet drama as “philosophical or poetic speeches and monologues, a theater characterized by a withdrawal from and resistance to scenic action” (15). Although the dialogue itself seems unlikely to lend itself to staging, there are infrequent but, as I argue, crucial stage directions in Three Dialogues that suggest a kind of theatrical imaginary.

10 The early plays Human Wishes and Eleutheria are not included in the Faber & Faber Complete Dramatic Works nor the The Grove Centenary Edition of Beckett’s complete works.

11 For clarity’s sake, here is the passage in its entirety: “We arrive, then, at this equation: minimalism breaks with late modernism through a partial reprise of the historical avant-garde, specifically its disruption of the formal categories of institutional art. To understand minimalism—that is, to understand its significance for advanced art since its time—both parts of this equation must be grasped at once.

“First the minimalist break: rhetorically at least, minimalism is inaugurated when [Donald] Judd reads late modernism so literally that he answers its call for self-critical objectivity perversely with specific objects. [Robert] Morris seeks to reconcile this new minimalist literalism with the old modernist autonomy by means of the gestalt, only thereby to shift the focus from the object to its perception, to its situation. [Michael] Fried then rises to condemn this theatrical move as a threat to artistic decorum and a corruption of artistic conviction; in so doing he exposes the disciplinary basis of his formalist aesthetics. In this general scenario, then, minimalism emerges as a dialectical moment of a ‘new limit and a new freedom’ for art, in which sculpture is reduced one moment to the status of a thing ‘between an object and a monument’ and expanded the next moment to an experience of sites ‘mapped out’ but not ‘socially recognized’ (in his anecdote, [Tony] Smith mentions ‘turnpikes, air strips, drill grounds,’ the very expanded field condemned by Fried but explored by Smithson and others). In short, minimalism appears as a historical crux in which the formalist autonomy of art is at once achieved and broke up, in which the ideal of pure art becomes the reality of one more specific object among others” (emphases original, 54).

12 Edgar Allan Poe’s theory of the form’s limits—that its “unity of effect” is achieved by a length amenable to reading in one sitting—is the most influential. See Review of Hawthorne’s Twice-Told Tales, originally printed in Graham’s Magazine, May 1842. “Poe’s Literary Criticism,” The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore. www.eapoe.org.

13 See “foirade” definition at Centre National de Ressources Textuelle et Lexicales. www.cnrtl.fr/definition/foirade

14 The numbering is arbitrary, and the stories are ordered differently in different publications. I use the order given in Gontarski’s Complete Short Prose; however, the order should not be taken as significant. I use the convention of referring to the stories by their first few words.


16 Larousse def. 1, 2, and 3.

17 Samuel Beckett, “Fizzles V,” MS 1550/19-21, Beckett Collection, Special Collections, University of Reading.

scholar Jean-Jacques Mayoux, professor of English at the Sorbonne, to ask whether he would undertake such an onerous task. In the end, Mayoux did not translate it.” Edith Fournier later produced a French translation with the title *Cap au pire* (Minuit, 1991), but it appeared after Beckett’s death, so we will never know whether he thought it was a success. When much earlier efforts were made to translate his work, however—notably Patrick Bowles with *Molloy*—Beckett felt rather guiltily unhappy with the outcome. If Beckett himself could not translate *Worstward Ho*, any translation produced by another writer probably does not capture what the work is doing. And, as we will see on examining *Worstward Ho* closely, it’s difficult to imagine an effective translation of such a sound-organized—yet logically coherent—text.

19 “When I asked Beckett if *Company*, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, and *Worstward Ho* constituted a trilogy, he replied, ‘I hadn’t thought of it as such, but I suppose so—more so than the other works called the Trilogy’” (Brater 12).

20 Samuel Beckett and Jasper Johns, Petersburg Press (1976). Beckett Collection, Special Collections, University of Reading. I will refer to this edition as *Foirades/Fizzles* or as the Petersburg edition.

21 This paragraph reads: “This book contains five texts by Samuel Beckett and thirty three etchings by Jasper Johns. The French texts first appeared in 1972; the English texts were written by Samuel Beckett in 1974 for this collaboration. The etching were made by Jasper Johns and proofed and printed by hand at the Atelier Crommelynck in Paris in 1975 and 1976. The publication was edited by Vera Lindsay. The paper, watermarked with the initials of Samuel Beckett and the signature of Jasper Johns, was handmade by Richard de Bas in the Auvergne. The type was set in Caslon Old Face 16pt. and hand printed by Fequet and Baudier in Paris. The binding was conceived and executed by Rudolf Rieser in Cologne. The book, 13 inches by 10 inches, is bound in handmade paper and boxed in linen, with an internal lining of colour lithographs by Jasper Johns. Each book is signed by the author and the artist: two hundred and fifty numbered 1 to 250, thirty artist’s proofs number I to XXX, and twenty Hors Commerce individually dedicated.”

22 Johns chose five of the eight texts for the Petersburg edition of *Fizzles/Foirades*. All were originally in French. The only “fizzle” that was originally in English was “Still,” which doesn’t appear in the Petersburg edition.


25 *Company* was published in 1980 and produced in January, 1983, with music by Philip Glass; *Worstward Ho* appeared in 1983 and premiered in New York in 1986. See the Mabou Mines website, maboumines.org, for more information about these productions.


27 Urged by Lear to a speech more “opulent” than that of her deceitful sisters, Cordelia initiates a repetitive exchange on “nothing”:

CORDELIA: Nothing, my lord.
LEAR: Nothing?
CORDELIA: Nothing.
LEAR: How, nothing will come of nothing. Speak again. (1.1.87-90)
Chapter 4. New Realism: Lydia Davis’s Ecology

I. “The Autobiographical Animal”

From a reading of Beckett and Worstward Ho, we turn to Lydia Davis reading (Lydia Davis reading) Worstward Ho. “Beckett was a writer I read closely and intensely starting way back. I love the way he keeps within the syntax and yet does such odd things,” she has said.¹ In “Southward Bound, Reads Worstward Ho,” from Varieties of Disturbance (2007), the later minimalist doesn’t simply “read” the former; she writes from within a reading of Beckett. In so doing, she reveals the peculiar doublings produced by the mimetic behavior internal to reading and writing.

I mean “mimetic behavior” in the sense Walter Benjamin uses it in “On the Mimetic Faculty.” “The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man’s,” he writes. “His gift of seeing resemblances is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else. Perhaps there is none of his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role” (333). Benjamin’s essay is centrally concerned with language “as the highest level of mimetic behavior and the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity,” a view founded (contra Saussure) on the non-arbitrariness of the sign (336). But Elin Diamond and Michael Taussig have shown that mimetic behavior can be a conduit for “relational inventiveness,” in Diamond’s words (180), and “tactile knowing,” in Taussig’s.² “Southward Bound, Reads Worstward Ho” accords with these views of mimetic behavior: it is both a playful impersonation of Beckett and a serious Benjaminian exercise in engaging with the object through the sensuous apprehension and reproduction of similarity-without-sameness. An unnamed “she” takes two books on a van ride to the
airport: *Worstward Ho* and—in a nod to the set of texts that novel’s title references—*West with the Night*, a 1940s adventure memoir by Beryl Markham, a female bush pilot from then-British East Africa. Our main character plans to read the former while she has more energy on the way there, and the latter on the way back. The main text mimics the mathematical, combinatory spirit of *Worstward Ho* and its distinctive style, even lifting lines from the novel: “Road turning and van turning east and then north of east, sun in eyes, stops reading *Worstward Ho*. Road turning and van turning east again and south, shadow on page, reads: As now by way of somehow on where in the nowhere all together?” (572). The positional accuracy of Davis’s rendering tracks the reader’s perspective as the van travels. Sometimes the sun is in her eyes and she does not read. Other times, the sun is not in her eyes but she is perplexed, anyway. And sometimes the book is in shadow and she reads with pleasure and/or comprehension. At the same time, the language of position mirrors that of the pseudo-directional “less” and “worse” of the source text.

As most readers know implicitly but rarely acknowledge in criticism, reading does not happen in an ideal vacuum of contemplation. Surveying what we have “read,” we might become aware of the capaciousness of that term, “reading.” Some texts will have been skimmed; others heavily annotated; others cherished, shared, forgotten, remembered. Or, as in “Southward Bound,” a book might be marked by the recollection of the circumstances in which it was read. Books are a record of habit; we engage with them physically. (Some of us break their spines; others consider that act an unforgivable harm.) “Southward Bound” stipulates this relationship with the material book. But it also recreates the tactile dimension of language, especially as it is captured through Davis’s
mimetic technique. The situated context of reading heightens this other sensuous effect through interruptions; as reading slows down, defamiliarization occurs. Just as I have in the previous chapter, Davis torques this defamiliarization away from hermetic literary experimentalism and towards embodied reading.

But Davis’s story also amounts to a final clearing-away of any vestigial idealism in *Worstward Ho*. We read not just with our minds, but in and as our bodies—whatever those bodies do, whenever they thirst or hunger or desire, however they appear. For the main, mimetic text is annotated (an unaccustomed technique for Davis) with a syntactically conventional, realistic narrative of the van’s and the reader’s stilted, circular progress. *This* narrative describes the activities of a Beckettian character on the van—a woman who “does not stop walking back and forth restlessly” (571)—even as it insinuates the similarities between the main character’s situation and those typical of a Beckett play. The reader and the restless woman “are both early and wait for some time” for the van to arrive (571), and the atmosphere of absurd expectation continues as other women on the van (they “are mostly women”) repeatedly disembark in search of a working bathroom, meeting several times with failure. Via another kind of citation of Beckett, namely *Godot*, we are comically reminded of embodiment’s sexed and gendered connotations. Meanwhile, the reader finds that “some sentences are pleasing and some are not” (572). What she sees out the window punctuates what she sees on the page: the van passes a cemetery just as she reads “No once in pastless now,” seeming to rebuke the line or give it a mournful cast. As the van returns to its origin, the story’s last annotation ends: “Although she has liked many of the word that came in between, its last words, ‘Said nohow on,’ say as little to her as its first, ‘On. Say on. Be said on’” (574).
Like Beckett’s, Davis’s fictional minimalism aspires to the conditions of theatricality. But my reading of “Southward Bound, Reads *Worstward Ho*” is meant to show Davis’s divergence from Beckett, too. Where Beckett has endeavored to imply a theatrical situation—that is, a situation where spectators remain spectators—Davis has given minimalism a further revolution, using it to generate *performativity*. In other words, Davis’s stories are more willing to implicate the spectator in the performance, to insist on embodiment as a facet of reading, and to play with autobiographical narratives as a method for revealing the discontinuities within the self that says “I.” Davis’s particular reinvention of the short form has involved paring down to the starkness of observation: her writing uses language parsimoniously, exactlying, in a manner bordering on the mathematical. But her fiction reveals how what looks like abstraction, in one light, may in fact toggle unpredictably between the abstract and concrete, provoking the reader to a phenomenologically-inflected experience of the text-as-material-object. And it is not just that we notice the book in our hands (though Davis’s narrator does do that). In “Southward Bound,” the main character’s encounter with textual difficulty occasions a peculiar sensitivity to the tactility of the *words*, which present themselves like marbles in the mouth more than concepts in the mind. The story enacts an imitative dance with *Worstward Ho*, tangling with it as a thing that presents itself to an embodied experience. At the same time, impersonation takes on an internal discontinuity, operating at varying distances, from the closeness of inhabiting the style of a particular text to a mimicry of scenario or tone to critical distance. Insofar as it is Davis’s reading of Beckett despite her use of the third-person, the story conceives of the writing “I” *and* the reading “I” as layers of contingent impersonation, including self-impersonation. Called upon to speak
about the repeated situation in her writing of “the self watching the self writing,” Davis comments, “I seem to be moving less and less in the direction of fiction and more and more in the direction of philosophical investigation.” This response, too, attests to the performance implied by the non-identical self as writer/actor/audience, holding in place the way in which performing may be internal to philosophizing and vice versa.

Yet this chapter is only about Davis’s immanent critique of the subject to the extent that that critique is entailed in the re-emergence of “the real” in her fiction. This, I suggest, is the central task of Davis’s writing: to approach concrete reality, of which language and writing are taken to be a part, with a kind of reverence for the fragmentary and partial nature of any perspective. Realism without illusionism, we might call it. Hence Davis’s writing’s performativity: she is concerned, at all times, with mere behavior—behavior in its concreteness and writing and thinking as kinds of behavior, behind which a self flickers but near appears. Hence, too, her fascination with animals. For, as we will see, the “mere-ness” of animal behavior does not necessarily trouble Davis; she is interested in human beings on the same register.

Our meetings with nonhuman animals (or “the Animal,” as Western philosophy typically has it) constitute a special category of experience. And, accordingly, animals figure centrally in rites, rituals, and other performative cultural practices, broadly, and in performance art, more narrowly construed. Encounters with nonhuman animals often seem to present the possibility of an unusually intense and piercing encounter with the real—Dickinson’s “zero at the bone” in the presence of a snake in the grass. Yet animals can act as a foil to representation, too. Through a type of writing that embraces insignificance and lack of authority, elevating the fragmentary over narrative totality,
Davis generates instead a sense of ecology as a web of interactions, behaviors, and impersonations both imagined and realized. Her fiction’s claim to the world is not cancelled; indeed, it is for the tangible world that it reserves its greatest reverence.

Watching animals, becoming part of a “performance” that includes animals, and recording her observations from within that situation, Davis produces an account of behavior that rebounds on its human and bovine participants. Into *The Cows* seeps “the mud,” as Donna Haraway might say. The “autobiographical animal” comes into view.

II. Fragments of the Real

As clever and funny as Davis’s stories are, then, they also honor the concrete as an aspect of both the object-world and of language itself. She seems quite aware of the latter, speaking often of the divergent sound-fields occupied by Latinate versus Anglo-Saxon English words and the influence of this difference on her well-respected work as a translator. Her prose often possesses the sonic precision of poetry. She insists that her fiction should be collected as “stories,” not “short stories,” viewing the latter as “defined traditional form” of which her writing does not generally partake (“Art of Fiction”). If many short stories suggest, above all, the weighty “unsaid” or submerged “iceberg” of MFA fiction that has been laboriously whittled away, Davis’s brief prose pieces suggest themselves as strange objects and near-genre-crossings. In fact, a good deal of her work suggests non-narrative poetry, epigrams, or aphorisms. The minimalism of these pieces arises not only from their brevity, however, but from their distinctive use of style and structure against narrative richness, evoking instead the paradoxical doubleness of minimal forms: they are both incomplete (fragmentary) and final (sufficient). Thus,
Davis draws from life in such a way as to suggest anti-metaphorical, anti-allegorical succinctness.¹⁴ She has said that her writing tends to eschew symbol and/or metaphor because such devices depart from the thing at hand: “I don’t want to distract from the one thing that I’m concentrating on, and a metaphor immediately does that. It introduces some completely, even incongruous, other image and world. And it can work very beautifully, but maybe I don’t want to leave the scene of what I’m describing” (PR).

Davis’s word choice, here, is particularly apropos: that desire to remain in “the scene” of description is suggestive of her continuity with, and difference from, Beckett. On the one hand, it speaks of Davis’s commitment to a version of the real. Marjorie Perloff compares her stories to Beckett’s in Texts for Nothing and Fizzes: both writers “present[…] us with a series of images and word clusters at once highly concrete and yet indeterminate” (208). According to Perloff, Davis is even more “postexperimental,” however (212): In Davis’s oeuvre, “…the ‘self-reflexive’ fiction of postmodernism…has been replaced by what looks at first like the return to a normative realism, to the recounting of ordinary incidents that stand synecdochically for the larger fabric of life.” In fact, this realism “has a parodic dimension” (200). “The ‘misunderstanding’ inherent in ordinary language is the subject that animates Davis’s own remarkable fiction. The word as physical presence: in Davis’s work, vocabulary is stripped down to a bare minimum,” she writes (205-206). Davis has cited Beckett’s narrators’ “determination to attempt to see and to say though in the end all will be ill seen ill said” (“Coolidge’s Mine” 385). Her point is that Beckett’s experimentalism does not lie in challenging linguistic signification, per se, but in working within its failures. Beckett’s writing
remains, for Davis, an attempt to grapple with the object and with language, however futile that task—or an escape from it—may be.\textsuperscript{15}

Davis’s desire to remain “in the scene of what [she is] describing” is also an interest in retaining the sense(s) of scene itself—as in: the scene of writing, of speaking, of reading and/or listening, as well as the scene of perception and apperception and of the artist as both spectator and participant in that scene. Davis’s situations are deceptively ordinary. In a sense, she has discovered a way of doing less with the material. (Merely seen, merely said?) And one key engine of their ordinariness is their use of an “I” that is evocative of autobiography in a manner that Beckett’s use of the first-person rarely was, even when he drew from life. Davis’s provocative and disjunctive use of first-person narration gives the physical presence of language and the embodied scale of address in her works a further turn, re-implicating the writer herself in the written language.

Thus, the minimalist performativity of Davis’s writing is yoked to a strong preference for the mundane “real.” Her stories dwell in the stress points of verisimilitude, drawing on nonfictional source material and transfiguring it only to the extent that it is stripped—or broken—down. Her most recent collection, \textit{Can’t and Won’t} (2014), includes a story entitled, “The Two Davises and the Rug,” but it is told in the third person; “Letter to a Frozen Peas Manufacturer,” from the same collection, is evidently based on an actual letter Davis sent to General Mills.\textsuperscript{16} Notes at the end of \textit{Can’t and Won’t} explain that the collection’s “dream pieces” “were composed from actual night dreams and dreamlike waking experiences of my own; and the dreams, waking experiences, and letters of family and friends,” while stories “from Flaubert” “were formed from material found in letters written by Gustave Flaubert, most of them to
his friend and lover Louise Colet...excerpted, translated from the French, and slightly rewritten” (289).

Nonetheless, all writing is selection, and Davis finds ways to insist on the incompleteness of her “realism.” Break It Down (1986): from Davis’s first collection and its title story comes the imperative that characterizes her approach to representation. (Not subvert, not abandon, not kill it, but break it down.) Consider Davis’s exactly contemporaneous “Form as response to doubt,” an essay in sections derived from an “unpublished manuscript” and a talk given in San Francisco in November, 1986, and published in HOW(ever) the following year. “Form as response to doubt” espouses fragmentation as a way forward for fiction:

To work deliberately in the form of the fragment can be seen as stopping or appearing to stop a work closer, in the process, to what Blanchot would call the origin of writing, the center rather than the sphere. It may be seen as a formal integration, an integration into the form itself, of a question about the process of writing.

It can be seen as a response to the philosophical problem of seeing the written thing replace the subject of the writing. How? “Constant interruption, fragmentation, also keeps returning the reader not only to the real world, but to a consciousness of his or her own mind at work.” The fragment, in other words, is alienating where the whole is immersive. Yet:

We can’t think of fragment without thinking of whole. The word fragment implies the word whole. A fragment would seem to be a part of a whole, a broken-off part
of a whole. Does it also imply, as with other broken-off pieces, that enough of them would make a whole, or remake some original whole, some ideal whole?

Framing this as a question, Davis raises the possibility that a collection of fragments may be both more and less than their sum: even when they are identical to the pieces that make a whole, they may not be sufficient to it—or they may exceed it. Her investment is relatively transparent; she cites Barthes citing Gide: “incoherence is preferable to a distorting order.” But the fragment also carries an elegy for the whole: Davis notes the link to “ruin…something like behind from a past original whole” and to grief, “the writer’s stutter” in the face of grief. “Stuttering,” however, the writer makes available “the workings of his mind.” The minimalism of the fragment would appear to be self-evident, but Davis’s explicit engagement with it multiplies the perspectives from which this minimalism is visible. The fragment is necessarily small and partial, of course, at least in relation to its implied whole. There is something elegiac about the fragment; it bespeaks the loss of the thing it came from and, in its “broken-off”-ness, the trauma of that separation. Fragmentary writing also heightens language’s concreteness: “Any interruption, either of our expectations or of the smooth surface of the work itself—either by breaking off, confusing it, leaving it actually unfinished—foregrounds the work as artifact, as object, rather than as invisible purveyor of meaning, emotion, atmosphere.” The implied reader is imagined in an encounter with the work-as-object, in other words; further, this encounter takes precedence over an interpretive engagement.

Davis draws from life, but this process only intensifies the fragmentary nature of all her writing: every piece constitutes a selection, a distillation, or a compression. Sometimes, the stories seem to disintegrate under the weight of their narrator’s efforts at
interpretive mastery. In “Story” and “The Letter,” as a narrator struggles to understand a relationship’s dissolution, “sentences foreground temporal and causal conjunctions” such as “but,” “since,” “either,” “or,” and “because.” “Logical reasoning, it is implied, can lead us to the truth,” although “[t]he greater the precision, the more exact the detailing of…incidents, the less the narrator’s ability to draw inferences” (Perloff 207). In “Break It Down,” a man tries to tabulate the cost of an affair. In so doing, the first-person narrator (there is an opening narrator who speaks in the third-person, but then subsequently disappears) proceeds to analyze the components of the affair, assigning them value. “Say $80 a day, no, more like $100 a day,” he says near the beginning. “And we made love, say, once a day on the average. That’s $100 a shot. And each time it lasted maybe two or three hours so that would be anywhere from $33 to $50 an hour, which is expensive” (17). It quickly becomes apparent, however, that the affair can’t be parsed into discrete acts and events: “Though of course that wasn’t all that went on, because we were together almost all day long” (17). Or, rather, it both falls into such incidents and resists that episodic structure, at once. As our first-person narrator gets going, he speaks/writes in long, paratactic streams, in paragraphs that begin with conjunctions. Memories rise to the surface with the speed and ungainliness of a comma splice:

…I’m beginning to lose it, you’re afraid of how weak you are, that you can’t get her all back into you again and now the whole thing is going out of your body and it’s more in your mind than your body, the picture come to you one by one and you look at them, some of them last longer than others, you were together in a very white clean place, a coffee house, having breakfast together, and the place is so white that against it you can see her clearly, her blue eyes, her smile, the colors
of her clothes, even the print of the newspaper she’s reading when she’s not looking up at you, the light brown and red and gold of her hair when she’s got her head down reading, the brown coffee, the brown rolls… (20)

Memories thus retain the mournful urgency of the fragment, yet there is a continual tension between this onrushing concreteness (“a very clean white place”) and the idealized wholeness that the pronoun “it” attempts to index. Pointing out the proliferation of this pronoun in the story, Lee Edelman has suggested that “‘it’ is the structural counterpart to the narrator’s faith in thought. In this sense the multiplications of ‘it’ disavow its nonexistence as a comprehensive totality” (86). In light of “Form as response to doubt,” we might, in fact, read “Break It Down” as a meditation on the fantasy thread between fragment and whole. “It” and its roving ubiquity mark the narrator’s desire to grasp a totality that does not exist. “You know the pain is part of the whole thing,” the narrator says at the end, as if to underline the story’s preoccupation with this relationship, “And it isn’t that you can say afterwards the pleasure was greater than the pain and that’s why you would do it again. That has nothing to do with it” (emphasis added, 24). The narrator’s attempt to measure and calculate value is alternately darkly comic and charged with pathos and, of course, useless. “[A]ccounting is the fetish intended to organize the disorganization of ‘it,’” Edelman suggests. “Though he theorizes ‘it’s instability, ‘it’s ceaseless recomputations of value, his theorization takes for granted that theory or thought is adequate to ‘it’s measure” (87). By the end of “Break It Down,” the first-person narrator must confront the ruins of the relationship as fragments that are not constituent.
With its long, paratactic sentences near the middle, the style of “Break It Down” recalls *The Unnamable*, but the scenario is not so far from that of *Krapp’s Last Tape*, wherein the elderly Krapp listens to the taped voice of his 39-year-old self giving an account of a romantic liaison in a punt. “Break It Down” is framed like a play text: it does not begin with its first-person narrator, but with a third-person narrator: “He’s sitting there staring at a piece of paper in front of him. He’s trying to break it down. He says: I’m breaking it all down…” (17). This original narrator never returns; his appearance merely sets the scene. But whereas *Krapp’s Last Tape* in effect performs a kind of incoherence as Krapp replays pieces of his old tapes, in “Break It Down” the discontinuity is subtler—an inconsistency of narration and of memory. Indeed, the ingenuity of *Krapp’s Last Tape* lies in its introduction of the tape recorder as a method for reproducing various gaps and aporias on stage. The tape recorder simulates the folding of time, in a sense: the voice of Krapp’s past is heard on stage in the present. But this device accentuates the abyss between past and present, as well as the discontinuities within the self. I would contend that *Krapp’s Last Tape* thus discovers a visual tension, too, by playing with one of the necessary conditions of theatrical performance: the apparent continuity of the actor’s body on stage. In fact, this continuity is always a source of friction. That tension is preserved to a certain extent in “Break It Down,” where the chimerical unity of the first-person is juxtaposed with the dis-integration of the “I” that struggles to make an account of itself.

In other words, what may seem counterintuitive—that is, my description of Davis’s writing as performative and fragmented—actually makes a great deal of sense in the history of performance itself, in which I seek to ground my use of “performative.” To
be clear, I don’t mean to suggest that Davis intended “Break It Down” to be a play text, nor do I maintain it is a performance (except in a rather more figurative manner than I intend). My point is to show that Davis’s writing becomes performative where it wishes to hold in place the immediacy of concrete experience (which has the appearance of continuity), while also admitting experience’s discontinuousness (its varying intensities, its lacunae). A more recent story like “I’m Pretty Comfortable, But I Could Be a Little More Comfortable” (Can’t), makes these qualities more apparent, because it is broken into isolated single-sentence fragments on the page that represent incidents of mild, mostly bodily, discomfort. It is a list of various fulfillments of the title, such as

I’m tired.

The people in front of us are taking a long time choosing their ice cream.

My thumb hurts.

A man is coughing during the concert.

The shower is a little too cold. (105)

Some of the complaints do not speak of physical irritations directly (such as the second and fourth complaint, above). Since these grievances are presented cheek-by-jowl with familiar physical ones, however, even those that are not explicitly tactile tend to intimate thought’s bodily dimension—the fidgety anticipation of waiting in line (for something we want), the tickle of unjustified anger at another person’s coughing. The sentences get
even further from what we might think of as discomfort—“The cat has ringworm.//…//He calls me when I’m working” (107)—and, in so doing, implies how care for others may get entangled with deeply uncomfortable feelings like disgust and rage in everyday life. And the story’s narrator, with her apparent lack of sophistication (“The store is out of decaf hazelnut coffee”) and her whininess (“When I toast the raisin bread, the raisins get very hot”), begins to get on our nerves if we let her, at which point we may complain, as she does, “I can’t decide whether to go on reading this book” (109, 110, 109). In each instance, “I’m Pretty Comfortable” seems to involve the reader by prodding. The ease with which some complaints call up a specific embodied recollection provokes us to irritation with ourselves even as we’re irritated with the narrator. No doubt, too, the gender and racial politics of the story compound this self-reflexive aggravation, since the narrator is subtly coded as a white woman. One ricochets between identification and estrangement, forgetting and remembering the “story” (that we could stop reading at any time). Finally, the “story” ends abruptly with a reminder of mortality: “The clock is ticking very loudly” (111). Until this moment, time has been passing innocuously. Each complaint, isolated on the page, obviously marks a new scene occurring at a new time, and even the repeated form (a sentence followed by identical white spaces) creates a visual rhythm like ticking. The effect is of an embodied reality that proceeds in blips and skips alongside the experience of reading with steady rhythm. Meanwhile, the story palpably strives to generate the sensation of pinging between unbearable intimacy with what is said and distance from the words as they appear, objectified and isolated, on the page.
“I’m Pretty Comfortable” thus uses some persistent techniques of postwar performance art, eliciting the spectator’s involvement and discomfort, while heightening her/his spatial and/or temporal awareness. At the same time, this story, again, contemplates the push-pull between fragmentation and totality. Writing on Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, Sianne Ngai has shown that irritation is a “mood” linked to the aesthetic of “blank spots” and gaps: “The formal or structural problem of inexplicit psychological causation is…strikingly similar to the state of irritation itself,” she writes (179-180). “I’m Pretty Comfortable” uses both literal and figurative gaps to incite just this kind of irritation, which is also connected to the overt *constructedness* of the text: it has been aggressively excerpted from life. Ngai seems to acknowledge that this is an element of *Quicksand*’s frustration, too: “blank spots” can be a text’s way of making its artifice visible. In fact, the fragmented minimalism of the text and the reader’s potentially uncomfortable involvement in it are of a piece. A work of visual art or a text, having solicited an audience’s attention, seems oppositional if it then refuses to validate that attention, as Ngai’s reading demonstrates. We might say that there is a discomfort occasioned by the sheer refusal of a work of art to fully absorb our attention by providing sufficient material for looking at or reading. Silence can present itself as nearly unbearable under certain circumstances, as the cliché “deafening silence” demonstrates. Blanks, gaps, silence—all evade the logic of exchange; minimalism refuses to “repay” the debt of attention. Meanwhile, silence can be passive (the silence of the silenced) or it can be an expression of resistance; often, when silence is performed, the performer perpetuates that ambiguity. This is another way (along with its essential non-reproducibility) that performance art “clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive
representation,” as Peggy Phelan puts it (148). “Performance indicates the possibility of revaluing that emptiness; this potential revaluation gives performance art its distinctive oppositional edge” (148).

III. Non-Metaphorical Animals

Davis’s body of work draws out a central comparison between the withholding or refusal inherent in minimal writing and the silence of nonhuman animals. She has written about animals throughout the span of her career; several of her author photos portray her holding a cat. Unsurprisingly, she has been influenced by Kafka’s animal stories, many of which perform precisely the kind of Benjaminian mimetic investigations I discussed at the outset.23 Since they receive the same minimalist treatment Davis gives everything else, animals are rarely sentimentalized; their vulnerability and strangeness comes through most clearly. And they pose an ongoing problem for interpretation—and even for perception—within the stories themselves.

The sense of disquiet generated by various forms of minimalism has something in common with the discomfort provoked by performance art and also by the presence of animals, particularly animals out of their “proper” context. In each instance, there is a feeling that the entreaty of the spectator or reader’s look is not quite rewarded, not fulfilled, but deflected. As I noted in my introduction, the sense of minimal sculpture’s hollowness, and its naturalism and/or anthropomorphism, seems to have disturbed Michael Fried (119-123). Derrida reports a distinct agitation under the gaze of his “little cat,” and this embarrassment inaugurates the investigation of The Animal That Therefore
I Am. I want to suggest that, in each case, it is among other things a lack of “content” that makes us uncomfortable. Animals have presence without “meaning,” per se.

For that reason, I make a detour to talk about a piece related to visual minimalism that, like Davis’s *The Cows*, centrally concerns a group of animals. Jannis Kounellis’s *Untitled (12 Horses)* consists of twelve horses, tethered to a wall, in an otherwise empty gallery (Fig. 8).

![Figure 8. Jannis Kounellis, “Untitled (12 Horses)”](source: Artspace)

An early example of Arte Povera,24 it was first created as an installation in Rome, 1969, and has since be re-staged in New York. Kounellis’s piece is not a performance piece, per se: There is no human performer. Yet it certainly includes an element of “liveness,” making the horses’ quiet presence felt in the space. All the artistic “content” is in its framing. *Untitled* “made instantly clear that art could be absolutely anything, as long as a certain level of intensity differentiated it from real life,” Roberta Smith writes of the original 1969 installation. In its use of ordinary and living “materials,” *Untitled* challenges the coherence of “art” as a concept, while underlining the resistance of artistic subjects—horses, we might recall, are painted on the walls of Lascaux Caves—to their
representation. The horses are presented very much as themselves, in an otherwise unadorned space. “When an exhibition like this ends, all that remains is a memory,” Kounellis has said of the piece. The minimalism of the installation is thus twofold: the animals themselves are not imbued with “meaning” in the sense of an idea we might abstract from the work, and the event is repeatable with differences, but not reproducible. Images from the original 1969 installation are arresting, but they are no substitute for the liveness of being in the space with horses, “just there, standing, eating hay, occasionally snorting and relieving themselves” (Smith). “[N]on-manipulation of the animal can perhaps be seen as one postmodern ambition or ideal,” Steve Baker writes of the work.

In the case of Kounellis’s horses…the postmodern animal is there in the gallery not as a meaning or a symbol but in all its pressing thingness. …This may be the animal’s key role in postmodernism: too close to work as a symbol, it passes off as the fact or reality of that which resists both interpretation and mediocrity.

(emphasis original, 82)

In Kounellis’s installation, the animals just exist; they seem to strike audiences as, alternately, “absurd” (Meier), mundane, “curative” (Smith), calm and calming. Art critic Jerry Saltz wrote of the 2015 New York exhibition, “The room has a reverence, not for a work of art but for life, and the ways it can embed itself in things we call art.” But that same exhibition was also fairly provocative: animal rights activists argued that the conditions amounted to animal cruelty.

In Davis’s stories, animals have a presence not unlike that of an artwork. Meanwhile, however, the “pressing thingness” of animals is sometimes upheld, sometimes overturned. Like “I’m Pretty Comfortable,” “Cockroaches in Autumn” is
broken into short paragraph sections that represent various interactions with the insects in 
the narrator’s infested kitchen. Like “I’m Pretty Comfortable,” it is an exercise in the 
interrogation of low-grade, mostly negative affects, from curiosity to boredom to 
annoyance to disgust. Like “Break It Down,” it explores the way in which unsecured 
pronouns—in this case, “they”—can reveal a narrator’s psychological state or 
investments. Thus, after two pages that portray the cockroaches’ activities (their “dung,” 
“the forest of moving legs” seen by flashlight [69]) and the narrator’s anxious vigilance 
as a result (“I am alert to darker spots against a lighter background, but these are only the 
roses on my pillowcase” [69]), we are similarly conditioned to expect cockroaches when 
we come to a paragraph like this one:

At the end of the meal, the cheeses were brought. All white except the Roquefort, 
they lay scattered over the board at odd angles, like cows grazing or ships at sea.  
(71)

Grammatically, “they” refers to the cheeses, not the cockroaches. It is our disgust that 
drives a momentary vision of insects crowding the Roquefort, instead, though the 
confusion is abetted by Davis’s distancing of the antecedent, their arrangement, and her 
similes. It’s like a little magic trick: since the cockroaches have already been compared to 
boats, and since we’ve already seen them “at odd angles,” we see them again, 
ungrammatically.

But disgust, here, is tempered by something else: the narrator’s respect and even 
admiration for the cockroaches and her dawning awareness of them as “intelligent” (70). 
On the one hand, her regard for the cockroaches raises the possibility that they have 
driven her off the deep end. What she admires is, first, the cockroaches’ “will to live”
(69). Later, after a description of the new autumn chill and the closing the neighborhood windows, the narrator provides us with a vision of the cockroaches “eating spaghetti” like a regular suburban family (70). Then, “they are in such numbers conscious of us behind our flashlight beam,” and “in his [the cockroach’s] hesitation…you sense him as an intelligent creature. Between his pause and his change of direction, you are sure, there is a quick thought” (70). Finally, in the last paragraph, “They sleep behind a child’s drawings on the kitchen wall. I tap each piece of paper and they burst out from the edges of pictures that are already filled with shooting stars, missiles, machine guns, land mines…” (71, emphasis added, ellipses original). So there may be a hidden narrative, behind the many images of domesticity, of a mother’s mental unraveling. For the final image seems to contain an implicit comparison between the shape made by the cockroaches’ will to survive and those made by “missiles, machine guns, land mines,” as if the cockroaches offer a rebuke to imagery of the child’s drawing. On the other hand, in the absence of firmer evidence of the narrator’s coming unhinged, one can just as easily read the story “straight.” It might not be so crazy to think nonhuman organisms that cherish only their survival are in some ways superior to human beings, who fetishize militarism and aggression. In fact, the narrator goes through different postures of respect towards animals—what Matthew Calarco terms the identity, the difference, and the indistinction approaches to animal liberation.27

Among Davis’s multiple animal stories, *The Cows* is most like Kounellis’s *Untitled*, in that it asks reader to attend to animals in a sustained way. *The Cows* describes the activities of a group of cows visible from Davis’s window. It is a fragmentary chapbook, written in Davis’s characteristically austere prose and punctuated by
photographs of the cows taken by the writer herself; her son, Theo; and her brother, Stephen. *The Cows* is also quietly but nonetheless radically unclassifiable. Neither fiction nor nonfiction, per se, nor poetry, nor drama, it dallies which each of these genres and, in its use of photography, at times evades even the linguistic. We might even imagine it as a conceptual art piece, enacting two directives:

1. Over the course of a given period of time, observe the bovine mammals living across the road, and
2. Record your observations.

That is, the *idea* of observing—and particularly of closely observing a group of nonhuman mammals over a long duration—resembles ethology more than literary exploration, which has overwhelmingly favored the representation of human animals.28

In *The Cows*, “the pressing thingness” of the cows gives way to something else—their sheer otherness, perhaps. Certainly meaning and interpretation are problems, here. Davis’s prose is typically stark, austere, at times almost unliterary; *The Cows* is less funny than usual, eschewing cleverness. The descriptions of the cows underline the narrator’s inadequate vision of them. “That one’s legs are moving, but because she is facing us directly she seems to be staying in one place. Yet she is getting bigger, so she must be coming this way” (12).29 Often, they appear as abstract shapes: the cows together look like “one dark irregular mass, with twelve legs” (11), or they are all “bumps” against the snow (26), or “wide black strokes of a pen” (27), or one cow “forms a long, very acute triangle,” while her head “is nearly an isosceles triangle” (19). One section claims: “They are often like a math problem: 2 cows lying down in the snow, plus 1 cow standing up looking at the hill, equals 3 cows. Or 1 cow lying down in the snow, plus 2 cows on
their feet looking this way across the road, equals 3 cows” (28). “The cows in the past, the present, and the future” were “so black”—“so black” repeated—against the background colors of various seasons (29). The reader gathers that they are not easy to see; the precise and unadorned manner of description suggests the narrator’s effort to be accurate (as well as the failure of that effort).

It is, it seems, a problem of perspective: the cows fade readily into the background, as the narrator struggles to keep their contours in view. *The Cows* begins with dawn and ends with dusk:

> They are still out there, grazing, at dusk. But as the dusk turns to dark, while the sky above the woods is still a purplish blue, it is harder and harder to see their black bodies against the darkening field. Then they can’t be seen at all, but they are still out there, grazing in the dark. (37)

A photographic illustration concludes the chapbook, in which the cows may or may not be present, for they are visible only as tiny darker blobs in the darkness of the picture. Thus, *The Cows* depicts the narrator’s effort to keep the cows in view as much as the cows themselves. In the closing image and its accompanying text, the cows are “visible, invisible,” as Marianne Moore once described the jellyfish. On one level, the passage speaks of the literal “darkening field,” as in the enclosed space where the cows live. On another, the section’s intimation of visual contrast (or lack thereof) makes other definitions of “field” suddenly available: the text seems to be speaking, as well, of a perceptual field.30 The narrator’s difficulty discerning figure from ground suggests a problem of categories. The cows are not always a secure focal point, seeming to inhabit both foreground and background. This confusion may recall the cows’ incomplete
liberation from their typical place in Western art as background or landscape unless, occasionally, as carcass. Meanwhile, the text’s expansion of the senses of “field,” and the figure-ground problem that vexes the narrator’s perceptual field, also evoke the place of animals in Western philosophy: as the subjugated ground against which the human figure is not-so-clearly delineated. Indeed, this final page of *The Cows* obliquely alludes to the philosophical history: “They do not know the words ‘person,’ ‘neighbor,’ ‘watch,’ or even ‘cow’” constitutes the first section paragraph on the page (37). If they at times seem superlatively available to representation—due their alleged “thingness”—they nonetheless defy their own representation, literally and figuratively moving in and out of view, flickering between legibility and illegibility. Are they part of nature or part of language? Are these two categories in opposition? At the end of *The Cows*, these questions remain unanswered.

The figure-ground problem that troubles *The Cows* from beginning to end also implies an analogous aesthetic question: Are the cows the subject or the object of representation? Even when the narrator can see them clearly, we witness the way in which her descriptions tend to slide away from the cows as concrete entities and into speculation about their inner lives:

It is the lowered head that makes her seem less noble than, say, a horse, or a deer surprised in the woods. More exactly, it is her lowered head and neck. As she stands still, the top of her head is level with her back, or even a little lower, and so she seems to be hanging her head in discouragement, embarrassment, or shame. There is at least a suggestion of humility and dullness about her. But all these suggestions are false. (22)
The careful enactment of the writer’s assumptions—their reasoning, their foundation—is abruptly overturned by the logical vocabulary of the last sentence, which has the trenchant quality of reproof. Here, the form of *The Cows* makes a difference, for this unpredictable toggling between subjecthood and objecthood is, I would suggest, a perceptual transformation that visual Minimalism often enacts and performance always contemplates. Fried argues that the defining characteristic of minimal art is shape. “The shape *is* the object: at any rate, what secures the wholeness of the object is the singleness of its shape,” he writes (119). More damningly, for Fried, “a kind of a latent or hidden naturalism, indeed anthropomorphism, lies at the core of literalist theory and practice” (emphases added, 129). The amplification by which “naturalism” becomes “anthropomorphism” is, for Fried, key to the “theatricality” of the minimal art object, but it makes as much sense to compare certain large-scale minimalist sculptures to large, still animals. Indeed, in some ways, the unease he implies in the presence of these objects may suggests the validity of such a comparison.

Meanwhile, *The Cows* imagines the cows as performers more than once, expanding throughout upon the senses of “play”—both verb and noun—that can apply to them. It begins “like the next act, or like the start of an entirely new play”:

Each new day, when they come out from the far side of the barn, it is like the next act, or the start of an entirely new play.

They amble out from the far side of the barn with their rhythmic, graceful walk, and it is an occasion, like the start of a parade.
Sometimes the second and third come out in stately procession while the first has stopped and stands still, staring.

They come out from behind the barn as though thing is going to happen, and then nothing happens. (7-9)

Nor is this the last time The Cows invites us to imagine the proceedings as theatrical or dramatic, framed by a kind of stage or structured by Davis’s role as audience to, and sometime-participant in, the action, such as it is. Not only is the window through which Davis views the cows “bounded,” stage-like, by a hedge at bottom and “leafy trees” on either side, but there is a moment when “we pull back the curtain in the morning and they are already there, in the early sunlight” (9). Davis watches their activities like as a spectator might, anticipating that something “is going to happen.” Though she says “nothing happens,” the rest of The Cows both affirms and undoes that statement. Much of what happens, the narrator apparently does not see. “They are motionless until they move again,” she writes, tautologically (9). The next short section muses: “So often they are standing completely still. Yet when I look up again a few minutes later, they are in another place, again standing completely still” (11). Already, the narrator has begun to unravel what she said earlier about “nothing happening.” Why is “standing completely still” not something happening? Again, the text raises the problem of what constitutes an event (figure), as opposed to the “empty” passing of time (ground), which is emphasized through The Cows’ imagery of the day and the seasons passing. Later, the cows move “as if following exactly the instructions of a choreographer” (17). One cow “prances”; they engage in “a lively game of butt-your-head” (19). The Cows expands the sense of “play”:
Forms of play: head butting; mounting, either at the back or at the front; trotting away by yourself; trotting together; going off bucking and prancing by yourself; resting your head and chest on the ground until they notice and trot toward you; circling each other; taking the position for head-butt ing and then not doing it. (20)

No specific motivations are sought for these activities; they are merely playful. Whereas the narrator had previously portrayed the cows “functioning as a single entity,” at play, they become recognizable as a community, as a web of interactions. They become, at the same time, not human—still thoroughly cow—but also another creature that plays. We might read this moment as one in which humans and animals are endowed with a similar capacity; though far more positive than Bentham’s suggestion of animals’ capacity to suffer, the assertion of their capacity to play functions by the same logic. Given the form of The Cows, however, we might also see play in an expanded field: that playing is a mode of relationality; a pleasurable sharing-of-space; a way of being a community that is, potentially, open to human and nonhuman animals alike.

What The Cows reveals maybe more insistently than anything else is the high-wire act of representing animals in any sustained way without ostensibly transforming them into human subjects—our reflections. Meditating on the cows’ physical position with respect to her own, the narrator suggests that she may pay more attention to them when she can see them more clearly. However, “when they are perfectly end-on or front-on to me, the least of them is visible” (30). The context suggests this statement is meant in a literal way: head- or rump-on, one sees less of the whole cow. But the odd syntax of the phrase—with “least” used as a noun—and the fact that it ends a long(ish) section also makes it conspicuous: the least of them is visible might be a kind of manifesto for the
representation of animals. Yet it doesn’t mean Davis has abandoned a project of engaging with the material life of the cows. That project continues right until the end of *The Cows*. In the penultimate section, the narrator notices again the influence of her own perspective: “At dusk, when our light is on indoors, they can’t be seen, though they are in the field across the road. If we turn off the light, and look out into the dusk, gradually they can be seen again” (37). Then the final section (quoted in its entirety above) suggests the narrator’s continued efforts to see the cows in the dim twilight and, finally, her imaginary vision of them “still out there, grazing in the dark” once they can no longer be seen. So, rather than an abdication of the responsibility of keen observation, “the least of them is visible” seems to me a kind of philosophical stance, attesting to the gaps in any representation of them.

Those gaps, the text’s mimetic and diegetic fragmentation, extend in subtle ways to the narrator/writer herself. The lacunae in her vision; the omissions in her narration, appearing as the white space of the section gaps; and the photographs themselves all speak to the narrator’s disappearances. Entire pages are taken up entirely by photographs, many of which were not taken by Davis herself. Meanwhile, the activity of observation, of thinking, and of imagining are frequently cast as the narrator/writer’s behavior. That dialogic turn I mentioned earlier—in which the narrator rebukes herself, “But all these suggestions are false”—implies as much, as if to say, “There I go, getting carried away, again.” It is also to notice the self getting carried away on a current of language and eager projections. It turns out that the eagerness of those projections persists at the end of *The Cows*, as the narrator envisions the invisible cows still grazing. For it is not only that they
cannot be seen clearly—a previous passage implies that the three cows that meet the narrator (or meet her eye) in the present are no longer the same three cows:

The third cow could not be bred because she would not get into the van to be taken to the bull. Then, after a few months, they wanted to take her to be slaughtered. But she would not get in the van to be taken to slaughter. So she is still there. (36)

Did the other two cows get in the van? The Cows only raises that possibility without confirming it. In reality, yes, only one of Davis’s cows still grazes in the field: the one who refused.32

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1 See Macy Halford, Live Chat with Lydia Davis (10 December 2009).
2 See Introduction, 9-10.
3 See Victor Sklovsky, “Art as Technique.”
4 This is how Taussig understands mimesis’s role in perpetuated the appearance of identity’s persistence as a unitary, “real” thing in our lives, despite post-structuralism’s dismantling of it.
5 Francine Prose, “Lydia Davis,” Interview with Lydia Davis, BOMB 60 (Summer 1997). Web.
6 Elin Diamond notes in her Introduction to Performance and Cultural Politics that the “terminological expansion [of the vocabulary of “performativity/performance”] has been produced and abetted by a variety of theorists whose critique of the Enlightenment cogito as fully self-present cause them to view their own critical acts as performative—as indeterminate, signifying ‘play’ or as self-reflexive, non-referential ‘scenes’ of writing” (2). “Poststructuralist conceptions of the human subject as decentered by language and unconscious desire, and postmodern rejections of foundational discourses (especially totalizing conceptions of gender, race, or national identity) have all made performance and performativity crucial critical tropes” (4).
7 Human exceptionalism and, indeed, the category of “the human,” as such arguably rely on our repeated articulation of separation from, and superiority to, nonhuman life. “Philosophical ‘logocentrism’…is in the first instance ‘a thesis regarding the animal, the animal deprived of the logos, deprived of the can-have-the-logos: this is the thesis, position or presupposition maintained from Aristotle to Heidegger, from Descartes to Kant, Levinas and Lacan’” (Derrida qtd. in Mallet). “Both [the ancient and the modern anthropological] machines are able to function only by establishing a zone of indifference at their centers, within which—like a ‘missing link’ which is always lacking because it is already virtually present—the articulation between human and animal, man and non-man, speaking being and living being, must take place. Like every space of exception, this
zone is, in truth, perfectly empty” (Agamben 37-38). “Might not the legitimacy of meat-eating rest, albeit precariously, not on our clear superiority to ‘the animal,’ but on our need to demonstrate this over and over again?” (Wood 138).

8 At the opening of When Species Meet (2008), Haraway writes, “There is a promising autre-mondialisation to be learned in retying some of the knots of ordinary multispecies living on earth. I think we learn to be worldly from grappling with, rather than generalizing from, the ordinary. I am a creature of the mud, not the sky” (1). Later, Haraway’s critique of Deleuze and Guattari declares, “This is a philosophy of the sublime, not the earthly, not the mud; becoming-animal is not an autre-mondialisation” (28).

9 Derrida 34. “Two general singulars to begin with: the ‘I’ and the ‘animal,’ both preceded by a definite article, designate an indeterminate generality in the singular. The ‘I’ is anybody at all: ‘I’ am anybody at all, and anybody at all must be able to say ‘I’ to refer to herself, to his own singularity. Whosoever says ‘I’ or apprehends or poses herself as an ‘I’ is a living animal” (49).


11 Davis describes short stories in this interview as “a defined traditional form…longer, more developed, with narrated scenes and dialogue and so on.”

12 In interviews, Davis has said that her stories tend not to expand or contract significantly upon revision. A New Yorker profile quotes her ex-husband, Paul Auster, on Davis’s process: “She would get an idea, three or four sentences or a paragraph, and she would write it clean off the top of her head and that would be it,” Auster told me. “The stuff she labored over never turned out as successfully.” See Brendan Mathews, Salon.com interview, and Dana Goodyear.

13 What I call minimalism’s “double edge” is explained in detail in the Introduction. Briefly, the Wildean aphorism, with its tone of insouciant authority, tends to emphasize the sufficiency of the aphoristic statement. The Adornian aphorism, by contrast, tilts in the other direction, since it underscores its finality through brevity but its incompleteness through the tension of internal paradox or ambiguity: “The splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass” is typical (Minima Moralia 50).

14 Whether and to what extent such details are altered is beside the point, as Davis herself has implied: “Just because a story uses material from the writer’s life, I don’t think you can say that it’s her life, or that the narrator is her. As soon as you select the material from your life, and arrange it and write it in a stylized manner, it’s no longer really identical to that life and that person,” Davis has said. Although she suggests writing “in a stylized manner” is part of what distinguishes fiction from reality, I would contend that there’s no styleless writing, nor any form of selection that would preserve an episode’s “reality.” See Interview, Paris Review.

15 “I love the way he keeps within the syntax and yet does such odd things,” Davis has said of Beckett. See Live Chat with Lydia Davis, newyorker.com


17 Both writers are perhaps showing the influence of Zen Buddhism on their thinking about the fragment. Later in the same section, Barthes writes, “Zen belongs torin
Buddhism, a method of abrupt, separated, broken openings. …The fragment (like the haiku) is torin; it implies an immediate delight: it is a fantasy of discourse, a gaping of desire” (94).

18 As Elin Diamond writes,

Common sense insists on a temporal separation between a doing and a thing done, but in usage and in theory, performance, even its dazzling physical immediacy, drifts between present and past, presence and absence, consciousness and memory. Every performance, if it is intelligible as such, embeds features of previous performances: gender conventions, racial histories, aesthetic traditions—political and cultural pressures that are consciously and unconsciously acknowledged. …there is no unmediated real and no presence that is not also traced and retraced by what it seems to exclude. (Introduction, 1)

“The disappearance of the object is fundamental to performance,” Peggy Phelan writes, in a mournful register perhaps more suited to my examples, “it rehearses and repeats the disappearance of the subject who longs always to be remembered” (147).

Performance art itself has conceived numerous methods for revealing its disjunctions, from Ann Halprin’s Parades and Changes (1964), in which performers changed clothes; to Laurie Anderson’s For Instants (1976), in which she played a record of her own voice (mounted on a violin) and asked, “Am I really here or is it only art?”; to Robbie McCauley’s career-spanning exploration of race and gender through autobiographical and semi-autobiographical performances like Indian Blood (1987) and Sally’s Rape: The Whole Story (1990); and even to Emma Sulkowicz’s now-infamous “mattress performance,” Carry that Weight (2014), or her current piece answering questions alongside a 3D-printed “copy” of herself.

19 I have done my best to preserve the spacing in this quotation since it is highly unusual for a work of “fiction” and since the isolation and juxtaposition of the lines are important for my argument. The spacing and format remain consistent throughout.

20 The story’s racial coding is admittedly slim, though “I’m Pretty Comfortable, But I Could Be a Little More Comfortable” might be the archetypal complaint of whiteness: the story also calls to mind the internet-meme quality of “first-world problems” and “white whines.”

21 It helps that the spacing makes it necessary to turn the pages frequently. I admit I find this ever-so-slightly annoying both for its tiny extra demand on me in terms of exertion and for the way it reminds me of the book’s use of paper, which can now become a source of guilt in the age of digital texts.

22 Ngai’s analysis of irritation overturns its “inappropriateness” (as opposed to anger or rage) especially as a response to racial injustice, in Nella Larsen’s Quicksand: “[I]t is as if Quicksand were polemically asserting the right of black artforms to create and preserve ‘blank spots,’ shedding new light on the novel’s motivation for preventing its own emotional or expressive gaps from being ‘filled’” (200).

23 I asked Davis an open-ended question about her influences during a Q&A at Rutgers in 2011. She cited Kafka’s animal stories and Flaubert.

24 “Term coined by the Genoese critic Germano Celant in 1967 for a group of Italian artists who, from the late 1960s, attempted to break down the ‘dichotomy between art and life’ (Celant: Flash Art, 1967), mainly through the creation of happenings and sculptures made from everyday materials. Such an attitude was opposed to the conventional role of
art merely to reflect reality” (“Arte Povera,” Grove Art Online, Rutgers University, Accessed 9 April 2016).
27 See Thinking Through Animals: Identity, Difference, Indistinction. The identity approach “founds its ethical and political frameworks on human-animal identity”; the difference approach has “a critical relation to standard conceptions of human nature and ethics and seek[s] to develop in their place a more relational conception of human beings based on the radical singularity, or radical difference, of individuals”; and the indistinction approach “aims to think about human-animal relations in a manner that deemphasizes the importance of human uniqueness and the human/animal distinction” (4-5).
28 See, for example, Sol LeWitt’s influential definition of conceptual art: “In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art” (“Paragraphs on Conceptual Art’, Artforum 5.10 [Summer 1967]: 79-83. “Conceptual art,” Tate Modern Website, accessed 2 March 2016. Web).
29 Because of the importance of elements like non-standard spacing and paragraphing to my analysis of The Cows, I have intentionally abandoned strict MLA style for the formatting of block quotations in favor of as close an approximation of the chapbook’s form as I can reproduce, here. Neither this particular formatting nor the photographs were preserved when The Cows was printed in FSG’s Can’t and Won’t. All citations of The Cows are therefore to the Sarabande Books chapbook edition.
30 See OED definitions 14a. “The extent of a scene which can be seen from a particular position; spec. the angular range which is visible through an optical instrument or with the eye”); b. “the extent of that which is perceived or experienced”; and c. “Photogr. The extent of a scene which is judged to be in focus in a photograph taken of it. Chiefly in depth of field n. the distance between the nearest and farthest objects judged to be in focus in a photograph.”
31 And, of course, some artists associated with Minimalism made sculptures that reference animal form with varying degrees of directness, sometimes including taxidermy. See, for instance, Rauschenberg’s “combines” of the 1950s, such as Monogram.
32 See The Paris Review interview.
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