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“The nothing that is”: An Ethics

Johanna Skibsrud

RÉSUMÉ. Prenant comme point de départ «The Snow Man», l'un des poèmes les plus connus de Wallace Stevens, cet article considère «le rien qui est» en termes généraux, comme moyen de conceptualiser la relation, implicite dans le discours poétique, entre «quelque chose» et «rien», être et non-être. L'article propose une comparaison avec *Null Object*, installation créée en 2012 par London Fieldworks (Bruce Gilchrist et Jo Joelson), comme modèle matériel de cette relation conceptuelle, afin de mettre l'accent sur la capacité matérielle, réelle (plutôt qu'abstraite ou virtuelle) de la poésie à dépasser les frontières de la subjectivité individuelle et de son propre discours.

ABSTRACT. This paper considers “the nothing that is”—borrowed from “The Snow Man,” one of Wallace Stevens’s best known poems—in broad terms, as a way to conceptualize the relation between “something” and “nothing,” being and non-being, implicit within poetic discourse. I use *Null Object*—an installation created in 2012 by the UK-based London Fieldworks (Bruce Gilchrist and Jo Joelson)—as a material model for this conceptual relation as a way to emphasize the actual, material (rather than abstract, virtual) potential for poetry to address itself beyond the borders both of finite subjectivity, and of its own discourse.

MOTS-CLÉS : Wallace Stevens, «The Snow Man», London Fieldworks, Null Object, littérature, poésie, philosophie, éthique

KEYWORDS: *Wallace Stevens, «The Snow Man», London Fieldworks, Null Object, literature, poetry, philosophy, ethics*

The nothing that is

“There is nothing I can say,” writes Marguerite Duras in a late essay—a strange, sad meditation on the death of a young British pilot: “There is nothing I can write. There should be a writing of non-writing. Someday it will come. A brief writing, without grammar, a writing of words alone. Words supported without grammar. Lost. Written, there. And immediately left behind.” (63) Duras’s description of a non-writing “yet to come” is also a description of the poetic approach already underlying every one of Duras’s diverse creative texts (novels, plays, essays, films) and yet Duras is right to cast the possibility of “non-writing” into the future. To write—or to read—poetically is to cast beyond the perceivable limits of language and being. As Michael Eskin puts it, poetry “unsays” ontology. It speaks not from, or to, simple presence, but from the pre-ontological grounds whereupon “nothing” becomes “something” (Eskin 2000, 55-56). In other words, poetic writing challenges ontology by revealing and questioning the grounds on which we imagine “being” in positive and universal terms. It draws attention to the very fact of those grounds—and therefore to the interpretive process according to which ontology arises at all. At stake in this recognition is not only the deeply ethical question of who, or what, can be imagined as “being,” but also the questions: What are the limits of “something” and “nothing”? What, and who, can be addressed?

Through its emphasis on the continuous, rather than binary relation between something and nothing, speaker and listener, Wallace Stevens’s “The Snow Man” illustrates a specifically poetic possibility: that of expressing the point of contact, and therefore of potential exchange, between the representation of a finite subject or object and what refuses, or is refused, representation. The poem’s negation of a coherent human subject within the figure of “The Snow Man” emphasizes the capacity of poetry to test the limits of both subjectivity and discourse. It is via the perspective of “nothing himself”—an inclusive perspective that unites the poem’s grammatical subject and object as well as its reader or “listener”—that the poem arrives at an encounter with both “[n]othing that is not there and the nothing that is” (Stevens 8).

Although “something” is certainly suggested by both of these iterations of “nothing” in the poem’s final line (especially by the use of the definite article and the copular verb in “the nothing that is”), this “something” is—at the same time—radically withheld¹. Likewise, “nothing” in the poem can in no way be understood as a simple negation. Through a complicated “unsaying” of the grammar of subjectivity, the poem succeeds in suspending the categories of “something” and

¹ Stevens resists personifying “nothing” in the manner of—for example—a poem like John Wilmot’s philosophical and social satire, “Upon Nothing,” which casts “Nothing” in the role of a monarch and explains the relation between nothing and something in genealogical terms:

Ere time and place were, time and place were not,
When primitive Nothing Something straight begot,
Then all proceeded from the great united—What? (43).

“nothing,” “speaker” and “listener,” “subject” and “object,” “being” and “non-being,” in order to reveal the ongoing process of interpretation that precedes—and thus makes possible—both experiential and linguistic access to being, meaning, and form. What is ultimately represented by the poem is, therefore, neither an abstract concept nor a perceivable “thing” but a moment of contact—immanent within every form of representation—between what is and what is not (or not *yet*) possible to perceive and understand.

“Modern poetry,” Simon Critchley asserts, “achieves truth through emotional identification, where actor and audience fuse, becoming two-in-one” (37). This “fusion,” I argue, need not be conceived in abstract terms, but might equally be conceived of as a concrete space of encounter—where the difference between the (known) parameters of the subject and/or art-object and the (unknown) other is preserved as a point of potential contact and exchange.

In order to think this possibility through more fully, I propose turning to *Null Object* [figure 1]—an installation created in 2012 by the UK-based London Fieldworks (Bruce Gilchrist and Jo Joelson), with the participation of the artist and activist Gustav Metzger. In keeping with both the aesthetic and political goals of the “auto-destructive” art movement—for which Metzger penned the first manifesto—*Null Object* emphasizes the significance not of the object (or “non-object”) produced and presented by the installation, but rather of the procedure that manifested it.

Instructed to think about “nothing,” Metzger was hooked up to an electroencephalogram (EEG) that measured the electrical activity in his brain. This data was then translated into a set of instructions for a robot programmed to carve out the interior of a 50cm cube of 145 million-year-old Portland stone, providing a “null reference” to Metzger’s (now doubly) absent thoughts. What results from this process is a kind of negative sculpture depicting the point of contact and exchange between “something” and “nothing” in three dimensional and material terms. Because, of course, it’s quite evident that what we confront in *Null Object* is *not* “nothing.” The material and sheer size of the art object can neither be abstracted nor ignored. Even the negative space at the center of the object is not truly “negative,” but instead the result of a set of positive instructions. Through the process of recording, interpreting, and representing Metzger’s effort to think “nothing” against the material limit of the Portland stone, London Fieldworks depicts the inseparable relation between the conceptual and the non-conceptual. This relation also exists between a negated subjectivity and the objective world. The “null” subject is rendered legible *as* a subject in contradistinction to the “null” object it helped to define.

While “The Snow Man” asks us to recognize, and reconsider, the boundaries of something and nothing, self and other, through grammatical and rhetorical play, *Null Object* presents the point of contact and potential exchange between these categories in material terms. My hope is that, by reading Stevens’s poem and its conceptual expression of “the nothing that is” alongside *Null Object*, we may arrive at a way of more fully understanding the actual, material (rather than abstract,

virtual) potential for poetry to address itself beyond the borders of subjectivity and self-reflexive discourse—to become a sort of “non-writing” that is also an ethics.

I intend “ethics” here both in a broad sense—as a way of thinking the integral relationship between self and other, known and unknown—but also in the narrower one suggested by Stevens in his essay, “The Necessary Angel.” Poets should, Stevens says, quite simply, “help people live their lives” (662)². To “not-write,” in the sense implied by Duras, is to resist the grammar of finite and self-enclosed subjectivity—and thus the equation between self and world. It is to locate within language, and within each word (“without supporting grammar”), the point at which it touches upon, but fails to grasp, what remains always beyond it, outside of itself—though integral and constitutive of its own being and possible utterance. It is thus to arrive at a way of attending to what poet and theorist Fred Moten calls “difference without separability”³—and of locating the real presence within every perceivable power structure of what we can’t, or can’t *yet*, see or understand.

Address Circuits and Contact Zones

Addressed to no one in particular, “The Snow Man” can be considered an “overheard meditation” (Culler 187). It functions like the rhetorical figure of apostrophe: an “address to the reader by means of address to something or someone else” (186). But it also tests this formula’s distinction between the apostrophic voice and the listening other by representing the essential entanglement of subject, object, and reader. By the poem’s end, all three have collided within the single figure of the listener, allowing the poem to playfully disrupt a rhetorical or speech-based model of subjectivity, as well as the categories of self and other, “something” and “nothing.”

The impersonal pronoun in the poem’s opening line—“One must have a mind of winter”—suggests a certain procedural distance and signals objectivity and uniformity, which the rest of the poem both builds upon and undercuts. The reader participates in this de-personalizing process, which progresses via the subtraction of human faculties: intellect, sight, feeling, and hearing. By the final stanza, it is therefore not only the subject—and object—of the poem (“the snow man”), but also the reader who can be understood to exist as “nothing himself,” within the evacuated figure of “the listener.”

From this position, the reader (like “the snow man”) may indeed look upon, listen to, read, and know “nothing”—and thus, this “nothing” can hardly be understood as a conceptual void. Instead, the tensions and layerings between

² “The poetic process is psychologically an escapist process,” Stevens explains. “[...] Escapism has a pejorative sense, which it cannot be supposed that I include in the sense in which I use the word. The pejorative sense applies where the poet is not attached to reality, where the imagination does not adhere to reality, which, for my part, I regard as fundamental” (661-2).

³ Fred Moten refers to “difference without separability” in a talk titled “Performance and Blackness” he delivered at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Poland, in June 2014. Moten goes on to invite his mostly white audience “to claim rather than to disavow this condition that is already ours...which is entanglement, vulnerability, the non-full, being both more than and less than ourselves.”

different linguistic and ontological expressions of “nothing” in the poem direct us toward a confrontation with the limits of perception and representation and ask us to see being not as a positive substance but as an interactive and an interpretive process. The poem, in other words, asks us to attend to the limits of being, knowledge, and discourse, not as mere lack or negation (despite its characterization of a world seemingly denuded of life and movement), but rather as an enfolding of plenitude and possibility. The snow man, the landscape, the listener—even “nothing” itself—are both there and not there. The poem itself functions as a site of indefinite, recursive, and infinitely renewable potential and exchange between being and non-being, “something” and “nothing,” allowing for the possibility of contact with, rather than abstraction from, that which the subject and reader of the poem cannot yet apprehend—either because “something” has been taken for granted, or because it has been actively negated or denied.

What is described in the final line, then, within “the nothing that is,” is ultimately neither ontological nor linguistic. It instead refers to a pre-ontological, pre-linguistic terrain where these categories have not yet been applied or cannot yet be distinguished—not because “nothing” doesn’t exist, but because the very real presence of whatever “nothing” names has so far remained invisible or has yet to be acknowledged.

By emphasizing the inherent paradoxes of referencing and representing what is ultimately unrepresentable, Stevens resists merely rebranding “nothing” as “something” (or vice versa). Instead, his poetic-ontological investigation foregrounds the continuities, and therefore also the possibilities for relation and exchange, between subject and object, presence and absence, the finite and the infinite. Poetry, Stevens reminds us, offers a way of rethinking—and unsaying—the borders of the abstract transcendental subject by uncovering the grounds upon which those borders have been erected. It exposes us to the following questions: What is remaindered in the process of arriving at “something”—or someone? What do language and subjective cover over? What are the ethical implications of perceiving and reflecting on the “something” of “nothing”?

In his essay, “Blackness and Nothingness,” Fred Moten, echoing Stevens, restates the fundamental question at the root of every rigorous poetical or ethical investigation of being and language: “The question is,” he avers, “Where would one go and how would one go about studying nothing’s real presence, the thingly presence, the facticity, of the nothing that is?” (774). Stevens’s answer—and Moten’s, too—is to study the “thingly presence” of the poem.

“Poesis, Poesis”

Although poetry maintains a unique relationship to what exceeds the bounds of both subjectivity and its own discourse, it is important to emphasize the continuities between poetry and other modes of knowledge production. Rather than making an exception of poetry—rarefying and ultimately isolating it from the world with which it seeks to engage—it is important that we recognize, along with

Galvano della Volpe, that poetry, too, is a “rational and intellectual procedure” not fundamentally different from the discourses of “history and science in general” (23). “The poet, to be a poet,” writes della Volpe, “has to think and reason in the literal sense of the terms. He must come to grips with the truth and reality of things ... no less than the historian or the scientist in general.”⁴

And yet della Volpe overlooks an important difference between a poetic approach to the “truth” and those of other rational and intellectual procedures. For poetry, the “truth and reality of things” is not something already in existence and exposed, with which the poet and the reader must “come to grips”; instead, truth becomes available for poetry only via a process of interpretation wherein poet, speaker, and reader become intimately involved in the pursuit of—and encounter with—what exists beyond all three.

“*Poesis, poesis*,” writes Stevens in “Large Red Man Reading” (1950), “the literal characters, the vatic lines.” Understood according to its Greek origins as *poiesis*, poetry deliberately blurs the boundaries between what “is” and what is “not yet”—what is merely possible, or yet to be imagined.⁵ *Poiesis* is the process—as Giorgio Agamben puts it—by which something “passe[s] from nonbeing into being, thus opening a space of truth” (70). Poetic truth is processual: It is not an abstract order of knowledge, disconnected from the speaker, listener, or the world from which it originates and to which it refers, but is instead deeply connected to the facts of both experience and language. For Stevens, as Critchley writes, “true poetry... is a poetry of fact, of fact created in a fiction,” and “the truth that we experience when the poet’s fictive imaginings are in agreement with reality is a truth of fact. But it is an enlarged world of fact: things as they are, but beyond us” (52).⁶

Stevens’s “The Snow Man” can be understood as a concerted attempt at articulating this “enlarged world of fact” (Critchley 52), opening within “the literal characters” of representation the vatic possibility of encounter with what escapes, refuses, or is denied representation (Stevens 365). This “vatic stance” is not at all uncommon to poetry; in fact, the lyric tradition can even be characterized by what Jonathan Culler calls its “embarrassing” habit of “invoking all manner of things, and thus presuming the potential responsiveness of the universe” (223 and 190). Following Aristotle, Culler understands poetry as a “*non-apophantia*” discourse,

⁴ This follows quite naturally, of course, if we are to acknowledge the poststructuralist thinking of Foucault or Derrida. Both of these thinkers explore the way myth and literature are foundational to scientific discourse—thus emphasizing that a distinction between poetic and scientific discourses has never been entirely clear.

⁵ According to Heidegger’s definition of the term, *poiesis* denotes the arrival or “presencing” of that which “is not yet” into what is—a definition he draws from a sentence in Plato’s *Symposium*, which reads: “Every occasion for whatever passes over and goes forward into presencing from that which is not presencing is *poiēsis*, is bringing forth” (QCT 10).

⁶ In Stevens’s “The Man With the Blue Guitar” he writes of a “a tune beyond us, yet ourselves, A tune... Of things exactly as they are” (CCP 135). When the guitarist strums, he sounds “sudden rightnesses” and achieves the “finding of a satisfaction.” “What might rightness mean here?” asks Critchley (39). “At its best, modern poetry achieves the experience of a sudden rightness that can be crystallized in a word, a name or a sound, the twanging of a blue guitar... Poetry intensifies experience by suddenly suspending it, withdrawing one from it, and lighting up not some otherworldly obscurities, but what Emerson in ‘The American Scholar’ calls ‘the near, the low, the common’ (41).

defined in distinction to *apophantic* discourse as a way of speaking that, by requiring “the presence in a proposition of an “‘is,’ ‘was,’ or ‘will be,’” can be understood, definitively, as either “true” or “false” (Eskin 2004, 577). Poetry, like other “*non-apophantic*” discourses such as oath and prayer, refers not to “actual events” but instead to “the kinds of things that might occur and are possible in terms of probability and necessity” [*Poetics* 1451a36-39]). “The nothing that is” expresses the *non-apophantic* structure of language as the primary fact of meaning and makes perceptible the non-actual as grounds for the emergence of both subject and meaning. In other words, Stevens’s “fictive” encounter within “The Snow Man” creates a *factual* basis for new articulations of the subject.

Null Object

The lyric model involves a subject’s address to the thingly quality of what exceeds it. Lyric, therefore, presents not only a way of identifying *the limits* of subjectivity, but also the possibility of crossing them; this mode of address is its ethics. Apostrophic, or “triangulated” address (whereby the speaker addresses the reader of the poem through language that is more or less explicitly addressed elsewhere) affords lyric poetry a peculiar temporality—what Culler refers to as a “special now” (224). While the formulation of this unique relation as “triangulated” suggests a fundamentally linear structure and implies fixed and singular identities for speaker, object and reader, the configuration among these entities is rarely that simple. Instead, each “point of view” often serves to undermine or “unsay,” rather than definitely assert, its position. The London Fieldworks installation *Null Object* illustrates a variation on the lyric model and its ethical stakes, a project that—like the formulation “the nothing that is”—resists easy categorization as either “something” or “nothing,” concrete or abstract, formal or conceptual. This resistance to categorization foils any attempt to assign identity to what is ultimately represented, thus ensuring that the process of exchange between speaking and listening, self and other, remains radically open.

Like Stevens’s “The Snow Man,” “[t]he core goal of the Null Object, according to Christopher W. Tyler, “is to conceptualize the inconceivable—what it means to think about the absence of any object, the lack of an object, the non-existence of an object, and so on” (75). But even as Tyler discusses “Null Object” in terms of absence and lack, what he describes is in fact a point of confluence and exchange between the “something” of a conceptualizing being and the “nothing” it seeks to encounter and represent. We can clearly see that in *Null Object*, for example, the negative-space representing the subject (actually a positive set of instructions: the record of Gustav Metzger’s thinking about nothing) forms both a gap and an opening, and can be understood to be both creative *of*, and created *by*, its material conditions. That is, even though the negative shape at the core of *Null Object* is presented as an absence, the process of rendering that absence marks the specifically local and material nature of the subject being described. The art object is not, in other words, an absent-minded record of abstract thought but is instead a

meticulous attempt at exposing the grounds that give rise to the possibility of a figure.

“Being a figure means that the contours that surround the figure are not shared but are owned by the figure alone,” writes Tyler of *Null Object* (81). However, when we attend to what exceeds these contours by referring to it as “negative space,” what would otherwise be perceived as the borderless, potentially continuous “ground” running behind the figure becomes figural to a certain extent and the previously autonomous figure loses exclusive ownership of its borders to become “the continuous ground behind the negative space” (Tyler 81). Rather than a traditional figure-ground relationship—where the borders of the subject are perceived not to be shared “but owned by the figure alone”—poetry presents, and allows us to explore, “the continuous ground behind the negative space” (Tyler 81) where figure is inextricably entangled with the grounds against which it may be perceived, and interpreted, as a speaking or listening subject.

Like the voice of the speaker in a poem (most overtly articulated by the traditional lyric “I”), the subject in *Null Object* literally “hollows out” its material conditions—but it does so without cancelling or abstracting itself. What is thus represented is not any “thing” in itself, nor any particular “subject” or particular “object,” but a “negative space” of confluence and potential engagement between the abstracted or unrecognized subject and the (almost literal) concrete. This affords both an awareness and a potential unsettling of the lines according to which this “abstract” subject has been drawn. Who, or what, *Null Object* prompts us to ask, is being hollowed out by whom?

With *Null Object* we conceptualize the “inconceivable” relationship implicit within poetry between “something” and “nothing”—as well as the way in which subjectivity *actually touches upon* the material conditions that exceed it. Metzger’s thoughts “about nothing” articulate themselves only via their contact with “something”—in this case, a 50 cm cube of Portland stone. Likewise, a poem like Stevens’s “The Snow Man” represents what is absolutely unrepresentable by exposing the limits of language and cognition. In addressing itself to these limits, “nothing” is presented not in positive terms *as* “something,” but as a positive possibility of encountering—and dwelling within—the difference between figure and ground and what exceeds, or precedes, both.

Even in the imagined temporal unity of the lyric’s “special now,” *Null Object* reminds us, there is a limit to the subject. That limit is precisely the poem’s object. By formally addressing itself to the informal infinite without the infinite receding into a definitionless void, poetry creates a conceptual interface between “something” and “nothing,” subject and object, known and the unknown. Poetry retains the possibility of encounter with the unknown and the other by demonstrating this relationship as essential to, and indeed constitutive of, being.

The “apostrophic wish” of lyric poetry—“that the things of the earth function as *thous* when addressed”—means that these things become, in the process of this transformation, “at least in part invisible, conceptual rather than material” (Culler 224). It is, perhaps, not so difficult to understand why the apostrophic wish

is often misunderstood as evasive, a space of infinite regress rather than of address and encounter. As Culler notes, even despite its establishment on the grounds of potential contact “between self and other,” lyric poetry “can also on occasion be read as an act of radical interiorization and solipsism, which either parcels out the self to fill the world or internalizes what might have been thought external” (225). But because the “energy of poetic address” is directed, ultimately, beyond the limits of the framing subject, the result is often, instead, as Culler argues, “a surprisingly strong sense of prophetic revelation” (223). (“Someday,” wrote Marguerite Duras, “it will come” [63]).

It is, in other words, precisely poetry’s “embarrassing” vatic aspect—its orientation toward the radical otherness of the unknown—that grants it the possibility of escaping the interiorization and solipsism of discourses that depend upon a logic of exclusive identity, binary opposition, and narrative progression. Not only does poetry distinguish itself through its capacity to confront its own discursive borders via triangulated address, it also engages distinct ethical and imaginative possibilities through what Charles Altieri has called “aspectual thinking” (43). Rather than prescriptive or ontological, poetry is speculative and prophetic—its discourse dictated not by what “is” or even what “seems,”⁷ but what should, could, or still may be.⁸ The apparently impersonal and descriptive tone Stevens employs in “The Snow Man,” for example, is purposely evasive—an abnegation of a more personal voice, or a fixed subjective identity. But this evasion directs us toward a new interpretive relationship between speaker and listener, self and other—therefore, toward a new “truth and reality of things.”

Enacting the paradoxical stance of poetry—indeed, of language itself—the final affirmative negation of Stevens’s poem (“the nothing that is”) articulates “the mind-bending confrontation between nothing and infinity” (Tyler 75). This is a confrontation that has formed the basis of our reality at least from the time of Anaximander⁹ all the way to our contemporary moment, where quantum theories posit that it is “the infinite value of the energy at every point in empty space” from which all objects derive their finite structure (Tyler 75).

As London Fieldworks explains in their introduction to *Null Object*, the subtractive process through which a void space is created connects the concept of

⁷ Stevens’s suggestion in “The Emperor of Ice Cream,” for example, to “let be be finale of seems,” in no way absolves the distinctly “aspectual” stance of the poem itself that builds and arrives at its meaning according to suggestion and association, rather than through the assignation of fixed identities and values.

⁸ “One day we may not distinguish (other than for knowledge) what creates from what is created, living man from the living universe” speculates Glissant: “The poem reaches toward that indistinction which is not confusion but synthesis (it announces it absolutely and renders it each time possible); and the synthesis in turn is neither interlace nor mechanism, but projection and maturation forever postponed. Thus the poem consumes itself in that future.” (79)

⁹ Anaximander’s “aperion” describes the “limitless” or “inexpressible” essence of all things. “The aperion is understood to be a similar concept to Chaos,” explains Tyler, “the original state of the ‘gaping void’ or vacuum that nevertheless incorporates energy from which the universe originates. Since he never clearly defines the term, however, saying that the essence of all things is the aperion amounts to a tautology, that the essence of all things is the universal essence. This leaves us with the conceptual void that we are staring into an answer that has no meaning” (75). It is this tautological structure that, I argue, Stevens’s poem specifically avoids.

a limit or threshold of thought to the limit of material form. The “evanescent” within the work can thus be understood to fade “into the unthought, not as something external to thought but something at the very heart of thinking” (28). “The nothing that is” functions similarly by describing what cannot be described—the infinite, the evanescent, the Other, and the unknown—as “the very heart of” both language and Being. In doing so, it expresses the fundamental ethics of poetry as both the abnegation and implicit revealing of its own limits and the limits of its address. The subject both exists and it does not: “there is nothing I can say. There is nothing I can write” (Duras 63). And the poem itself is already a kind of “non-writing”—a rendering vulnerable of language and subjectivity that reveals within word and subject, “without supporting grammar,” the possibility of at once becoming otherwise, and never having been.

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