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**The Uses of Brevity:  
Valuing the “No More to Be Said” in Jean Echenoz’s  
*Plan of Occupancy* and the Transcontinental  
“Critical Novel”**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the value of brevity in contemporary French novels, particularly Jean Echenoz’s *Plan of Occupancy*, in relation to the broader context of transcontinental fiction. Its central claim is that the stylistic minimalism of such fiction informs a “minoritarian” subjectivity that has both aesthetic and political implications. Additionally, I discuss, in brief, other texts that are central to this issue including Don DeLillo’s *The Body Artist*, an example of an American novel that not only limits itself to a page count far below the average in American fiction, but presents a style that is indicative of precisely the kind of minimalism that is accepted and, indeed, celebrated by DeLillo’s French contemporaries.

**Keywords**

transcontinental, literature, minimalism, subjectivity

The following assertion about the future of the novel appears in a chapter of Alain Robbe-Grillet's *For a New Novel* entitled "New Novel, New Man": "We do not know what a novel, a true novel, should be; we know only that the novel today will be what we make it, today, and that it is not our job to cultivate a resemblance to what it was yesterday, but to advance beyond" (135). While a complete overview of what Warren Motte calls French "fiction now" is beyond the scope of this paper, I would like to explore certain "resemblances" between examples of the twentieth century French and American fiction, from the 1930s on, despite Robbe-Grillet's admonition to honor the innovation of "today" and its privileging of originality. Specifically, I will examine the brevity of a particular strain of French fiction that has a spare but significant number of American parallels. Concision, the epigrammatic, a brand of minimalism enacted by literary brevity (and is thus, by extension, conferred upon a reader via the establishment of a dialogical relation between reader and text) best characterizes the work of certain texts over and against relatively baroque literary and personal expressions. Jean Echenoz's *Plan of Occupancy* (*L'Occupation des sols*) is at once a quintessential example of this quality and an exception, given the extremity of its succinctness. More importantly, however, I will suggest that this minimalist approach develops out of an unspoken *imperative* of brevity in so far as it may play a role in generating a "new man" or woman, one upon whom, as Robbe-Grillet claims, we may cast "all our hopes" (141) in a North American cultural milieu of excess and over-saturation, discursive and otherwise.

Though the conferral of a literary, minimalist aesthetic of the dramatic and the quotidian alike upon a given reader will be explored in greater detail below, I would like to say a few words at the outset to clarify the nature of this conferral. Let us consider a surface distinction between T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow," two poems that in the most general sense engage with human experience. The former, including footnotes, totals 18 pages in my edition,<sup>1</sup> while the latter comprises eight lines, each line consisting of no more than three words. Leaving aesthetic judgment aside, it is clear that one, the longer of the two, operates first and foremost on the intellect; it galvanizes the force of thought with its reliance on various languages as well as literary, historical, and philosophical registers. It utilizes the first-person pronoun (as many literary texts do, including some mentioned in this paper) to communicate, however abstractly, personal experience that may or may not cohere with that of the reader. The shorter poem, on the other hand, enlists the relative immediacy of sensory experience; a

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<sup>1</sup> See Eliot.

neutral description of a natural scene, a banal event that nevertheless compels the observer to recognize the magnitude of this site and the moment of its apprehension. It is in no way bereft of intellectual stimulation or intrigue, and yet, unlike *The Waste Land*, “The Red Wheelbarrow” invites the reader to co-occupy its domain, along with an anonymous and thus detached observer, in terms of both critical inquiry and the particular space of its rural landscape. In other words, the reader is asked to co-mingle with the simplicity of the observation and its natural setting in all of its import and immediacy by virtue of “so much” depending upon the mundane, both as it appears in a snapshot of nature and in the acute and sensorial observation of that image (Williams, “Red”).

We might think here of composer John Cage’s well-known claim, “I have nothing to say, and I am saying it, and that is poetry” (109). Eliot has a great deal to say and he says it, while Williams restricts his reflection to the depersonalized confines of a paradoxically pointed but spacious ambiguity. And like much of Cage’s musical oeuvre, the shorter poem presents “nothing” in such a way as to confer its weighty nothingness on the reader/listener via an overtly minimalist sensibility. There is nowhere to go in “The Red Wheelbarrow” (a footnote, an encyclopedia, a language course) and nothing to be (a classical scholar, a fevered intellect) beyond the bare attention one brings to its zero-point of a consequential *mise-en-scène*. Speaking “nothing,” I will argue, is precisely the agenda of the minimalist texts under consideration here. Though there is indeed much to ponder in their relatively brief number of pages, a group of contemporary French novelists, unlike most of their more traditional American counterparts, manages to say a great deal without the encumbrances of traditional length, (self-) reflective narrative, plot, and character development.<sup>2</sup> And like Williams, they follow an aesthetic course that runs against the grain of American culture’s expectations for fiction.<sup>3</sup> The reader of such texts, a novelty himself or herself by virtue of entering into the relative silence of their refracted discursivity, is offered the increasingly rare opportunity to become “new,” an extension of Robbe-Grillet’s new man or woman, to embrace a modern asceticism in so far as he or she may aspire to shed the excess word, volume, or

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<sup>2</sup> The “I” of Cage’s quote, I would argue, is distinguished by the “I” in *The Wasteland*, for example, due to its declaration of and immersion in “nothing,” thus minimizing the self of self-reflection and narration. I often view the latter as cumbersome when it impedes my ability to locate my own immediacy of interiority within the reading experience.

<sup>3</sup> In her *Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel* (2005), for example, Jane Smiley suggests that a novel should have a word count of between 100,000 and 175,000 (15).

identity as constructed by what Kaja Silverman calls the “dominant fiction”<sup>4</sup> (*Threshold* 85).

### Meet the Minimalists

Examples of a French repackaging and reinvention of American fiction and film are obvious, especially in the appropriation of genres. Here we might consider the work of Jean-Luc Godard in cinema (drawing from the American crime film), the early novels of Echenoz or Jean-Patrick Manchette (the American noir novel), or Christine Montalbetti or Marie Redonnet (the American western). Where American artists act reciprocally, however, is a bit less obvious, the key points of resemblance being style and, more importantly for the purposes of this paper, length. One could argue that the decidedly literary films of American directors Hal Hartley or Richard Linklater, for example, mirror the minimalist narrative structures, exploratory loquaciousness and social absurdity of François Truffaut’s work.<sup>5</sup> In terms of fiction, I would point to American writers John Hawkes (specifically, *Travesty*) and Don DeLillo, whose novel *The Body Artist* is particularly relevant here to the extent that it depicts a socially and existentially fragmented milieu in a relatively short number of pages. Ultimately, I will argue, DeLillo, like some of his French contemporaries, moves his protagonist beyond existential crisis by emphasizing the “now” of self-awareness, thus distinguishing *The Body Artist* as a unique apparatus in the cultivation of a North American “new man” or woman while maintaining a play of form and content that does not preclude critical examination or, indeed, ambiguity.

Of the wide range of contemporary French writers, those such as Echenoz, Christian Oster, Redonnet, Emmanuel Hocquard, Christian Gailly, and Jean-Philippe Toussaint are ones who, in my view, most clearly present a general crisis of social alienation and subjectivity (and thus the imperative of a “new man” or woman) according to various shades of a minimalist aesthetic. Far from constituting a movement, their collective work may nevertheless be included in the category of what Motte identifies as the “critical novel,” a work that

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<sup>4</sup> Here we may take “fiction” to mean both ideology and literary discourse.

<sup>5</sup> See Hartley’s *Amateur* and *Simple Men*, or Linklater’s *Slacker* and *Waking Life*, for example, each of which stylizes dialogue and cinematic technique in ways that, one could argue, adhere to an aesthetic that is co-terminus with the “critical novel.”

is aware of the tradition that it has inherited, and . . . positions itself with regard to that tradition in a variety of manners; it puts its own “literariness” into play for the benefit of readers who are attuned to that discursive gesture. It is also at least mildly avant-gardist in nature. It questions (either implicitly or more explicitly) prevailing literary norms; it puts commonplaces on trial through irony or parody; it seeks to adumbrate fresh possibilities; it asks us to rethink what the novel may be as a cultural form. (*Fiction* 11)

The “discursive gesture” is often manifested as truncated, staccato-like sentence structures and paragraphs, a tendency that is perhaps most apparent in Gailly’s *The Passion of Martin-Fissel Brandt* (2002). With passages such as “He hadn’t slept. Hardly. Poorly. Two or three hours in the morning. The sound of the ocean hindered his falling asleep. That sound and then” (5), the reader is compelled to align his or her own rhythm (of reading as a mental and physical act) with that of the narrative and its protagonist, a former lover and, according to his cat, potential murderer. Other examples include what Motte recognizes as “the briefest love scene in French literature” (or any literature for that matter), in Echenoz’s *Piano*, wherein a chapter consists of the single sentence: “Night of love with Peggy Lee” (*Fiction* 25).<sup>6</sup> Or we might consider Hocquard’s *A Day in the Strait*, whose chapter four of the Epilogue is composed entirely of the obscure statement: “While the landscape faded as night approached, this fabric in the air no longer hinted at anything but its transparency” (71).

The characters inhabiting such discourse are themselves marked by a *deceptive* transparency. Natural landscapes may follow a straightforward, intelligible course, though such characters, by virtue of an abridged subjectivity that follows the stylistic direction of the novel, exhibit both common surface features (desire being the most salient, self-defining attribute) and a certain opacity or inconspicuousness. A character like Oster’s Gavarine in *My Big Apartment* may have “something [he would] like to say” (1), as he announces in the opening sentence of the novel, though the circumstances of his trajectory provide little in the way of character development, much less a manifesto or definitive proclamation that one may be led to expect from the protagonist’s introductory decree. And yet, what little information the reader does receive about these characters and their trials is offered within the confines of such relative succinctness, often with pointed,

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<sup>6</sup> The original French has the lovemaking occur with Doris Day.

haiku-like phrases and precision, that we are nevertheless made privy to both individual psychologies and larger cultural concerns in which characters find themselves ensconced. Additionally, and crucially, the reader is given space among such narrative fragments to participate in the creation of meaning and his or her own discursive experience, rather than being locked into a literary or otherwise ideologically codified system. I will elaborate further upon this process of active reading below.

To get a sense of how brief the work under analysis here is, we might first turn to a text by Samuel Beckett, an obvious precursor to some contemporary writers, and specifically one of his “novellas” entitled *First Love* (written in 1943, published in 1973) that, in his own translation, totals 21 pages. As late as 1984, Marguerite Duras published *L'amant* at 143 pages. More recently, we find Toussaint's *La salle de bain* (*The Bathroom* published in 1990, 122 pages), Oster's *Volley-ball* (1989, 123 pages), Gailly's *La Passion de Martin-Fissel Brandt* (*The Passion of Martin-Fissel Brandt*, published in 1999, 142 pages), Hocquard's *Une journée dans le détroit* (*A Day in the Strait*, published in 1980, 83 pages), and the winner, Echenoz's own “novella” (designated as such in the translator's forward) *L'occupation des sols* (*Plan of Occupancy*, published in 1995), that concludes after 15 pages (the translation is 12 pages minus the forward). In spite of a popular tendency toward a considerably higher novelistic word count, such abridgement is hardly reductive in the sense of oversimplification. On the contrary, I would suggest that in the cases of the texts that are central to this analysis, their brevity precipitates an increasingly complex set of questions with which the reader is invited to engage beyond the call of most conventional and quantitatively more substantial texts.

In addition to page count, the stylistic features of literary brevity as exemplified by texts included in this paper may include staccato-like clarity and lack of adjectival adornment, both of which work toward the eschewal of overtly descriptive or sensationally evocative language. More importantly, such fiction generates an effect of what early *nouveau roman* writer Nathalie Sarraute calls a paradoxically “amplified present” (vii) by virtue of its literary economy. The characters that typically embody (and thus serve to amplify) such effect are often disempowered, bereft of social currency, due either to life circumstances or to a passivity that runs (or strolls) against the grain of societal expectations. Their lives and preoccupations are at once insignificant (or “minor”) and profound. Cynthia Hallett claims that “in their silence and paralysis they appear to be hyper-Hemingway-heroes, that is, not so much less-heroic—for Hemingway's heroes are *not* heroic—as they are *even more* not-heroic” (13; emphasis in original). And yet,

she also speaks of a “credible texture of consciousness” that is achieved by writers of minimalist fiction who “share the creative gift of knowing when to amplify, when to fade, and when to modulate” through characters and discursive events (7). I will argue that this consciousness and its many layers extend through the core minimalist elements as a (perhaps surprising but not unqualified) humanist project, through to the lives of characters and, ultimately, to the agency of the reading subject.

### Ideating Ground Zero

*Plan of Occupancy* is certainly an anomaly in Echenoz’s oeuvre due to its length as well as the degree to which it challenges literary conventions, including his own. As Motte explains, the book is “narrated in an uncompromisingly laconic tone where less always means more” and ultimately “dramatizes and puts into question the very idea of the book” (“Reading” 6). Here we might take “the book” to mean not only *Plan of Occupancy* but the Book as a general category that is interrogated by an overtly “writerly” process of écriture.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, for Motte, Echenoz “proposes to occupy the ground of the novel, precisely at the zero degree of that construct. *Plan of Occupancy* is elaborated in an aesthetic of radical eschewal” and thus operates as “a performance . . . that dramatizes . . . the minimalist experiment itself” (“Reading” 7). As such, its modus operandi is more aligned with a performative act than it is with plot. Consequently, I would take issue with Dominique Jullien’s notion that the book’s “importance [is] more on the tale and less on the telling” (52). Of course, there is an irony at work here, doubtless instrumental to Echenoz’s radicalism, in so far as the book relies upon an aesthetic of reduction while engaging with events and ideas that are clearly enormous in scope. As Mark Polizzotti, the book’s English translator, puts it, “In its brief evocation of a mother’s death, a father’s obsession, or even the deterioration of a humble plot of grass, this novella canvases as much human drama as a Russian epic” (Echenoz, *Plan* x). It is, in fact, this notion of the common “human drama” being so deftly excavated by a “zero degree” aesthetic, I would argue, that warrants the trans-continental approach to minimalist texts.

The book’s surface plot is uncomplicated but reflective of the monumental themes of death, loss and obsession. A woman has died in a fire. Naturally, her

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<sup>7</sup> The goal of such a process, as Roland Barthes, explains, “is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (*S/Z* 4).

husband and son lament her death, though the former becomes increasingly fixated on a large-scale illustration of his wife, a perfume advertisement on the side of a building. Another structure is being erected that slowly obscures the vision of their beloved. Consequently, they move into an apartment of the newer building, directly across from the advertisement, and proceed to tear down the wall that stands between them and the image. The final paragraph heralds both closure (the ignition of conceivably productive action) and the continued ascendancy of a foreboding mania:

From such a countdown, you can arrive at zero all too quickly. So you might as well get to it, might as well start scraping immediately: no need to change clothes, you already dressed that morning in your large white overalls speckled with old paint. You scrape, and layers of plaster hang in the sun, dotting foreheads and forgotten cups of coffee. You scrape, you scrape some more, and very soon you have trouble breathing, you sweat, it begins to get terribly hot. (14)

With this, Polizzotti suggests, “the text having reached its point of stasis, there is, quite simply, no more to be said” (Echenoz, *Plan* viii). And so the novella concludes, page 14 in the English edition.

There is, of course, a tradition of occupying a ground zero of aesthetic production. One might think of John Cage’s infamous *4’33”*, the performance of which continues to offend and delight by virtue of its questioning the boundaries of music.<sup>8</sup> Kasimir Malevich’s *White on White* painting poses a similar quandary, or pleasure, depending on the viewer’s prerogative; as do the films of Andrei Tarkovsky, embracing as they do long takes of obscure characters and landscapes, meditations on the immediacy of spaces and objects.<sup>9</sup> The list could go on. What these examples have in common is a kind of movement in stasis. The relative silence of *4’33”* is potentially rife with animated sound; upon close inspection, the minimalism of *White on White* reveals a plenitude of textured nuances; Tarkovsky’s stark *Andrei Rublev* is as much a protagonist’s journey against the backdrop of

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<sup>8</sup> A standard performance entails a musician sitting at a piano, opening and closing the lid according to fixed movements for a period of 4 minutes and 33 seconds.

<sup>9</sup> The irony here, of course, is that cinema, and particularly the cinema of Tarkovsky, relies not upon brevity but on running times that often exceed the length of a standard film. However, we might think of his own brevity in terms of an economy of shots, and thus, as an immediacy (of the image, of time) that grounds the film “precisely at the zero degree of the construct.”



medieval history as it approximates a still-life meditation on icon art. The stasis with which *Plan of Occupancy* concludes is likewise multidimensional. As the father and son prepare to work (or more specifically, to destroy), they eat, and “their mastication [is] only horological” (14), the implication being that they are merely killing time, as the phrase goes, without awareness of their food or, indeed, the act of chewing. Aside from mouths moving, throats swallowing, the moment appears frozen. And yet there is a single-pointedness to their primary aim, a sense that they are moving toward both the action and the object of their desire. And besides, despite the oncoming sweat and heat, “sun like this, Paul’s father [elaborates], really makes you feel like getting outdoors” (13). We will encounter a variant of this insertion of nature and its potential value with regards to *The Body Artist* below.

The filmic references here are not haphazard. In characterizing the book’s conclusion, Polizzotti forecasts that Paul and Fabre—the son and father, respectively—“will remain suspended in time—plaster dust hanging in the air, the wall of the brand new apartment forever half-removed—held in position like Redford and Newman in the last freeze-frame of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*” (Echenoz, *Plan* viii). Though I remain unconvinced that the wall shall remain half-complete, that the pair of mourners is without the proper motivation to complete their task, I do believe that, like a freeze-frame, *Plan of Occupancy* hits its endpoint and that continuing the story would presage an artificiality in the service of an unnecessary standard of length. That the translator chooses the analogy of this particular film and this particular freeze-frame is suggestive of my own interest in the transcontinental exchange of an aesthetic of reduction.<sup>10</sup> However, another film comes to mind that may in fact be more analogically appropriate. Consider the final freeze-frame of Krzysztof Kieślowski’s *Red*, the third in his *Three Colors Trilogy*. The protagonist, a model played by Irène Jacob, whose close-up profile has occupied an enormous billboard in Paris that is eventually torn down, is one of the few survivors of a ship accident. As she wanders amid the chaos following the rescue, a news camera captures her in the very same profile, a blanket wrapped around her neck like the scarf in the fashion billboard. Among the other survivors is a young male law student, a stranger to the model who will nevertheless, the viewer

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<sup>10</sup> See also Vincent Canby’s review of the film in which he makes a comparison to Truffaut’s *Jules et Jim*.

is led to presume, become the romantic partner for whom she has long been searching.<sup>11</sup>

While the prospect of two outlaws in the American Wild West escaping an imminent demise is unlikely, the conclusion of *Red* clearly points toward both a literal and a mystical salvation for the protagonist. Stars align. Lives are saved and lovers are bound to meet. The situation is not so clear for Paul and Fabre. And yet, their opening out and onto not only the image of a mother and wife but to the “outside,” to the natural light of the sun, however dismally hot, is also suggestive of renewal.<sup>12</sup> And as Motte claims, such renewal is not limited to a grieving process; it is “the very idea of the book” that confronts its own boundaries in a larger process of being at once enclosed by an abbreviated number of pages and expanded by virtue of its performativity. With no intention of romanticizing nature, I am suggesting that through the action of forging a threshold to the “outdoors,” both toward and away from interiority, Echenoz’s anguished characters are allowed the possibility of catharsis, however long-term or ambiguous. The reader is left standing alongside them, at the site of their demolition and, perhaps, their eventual revitalization.

That nature is here co-existent with representation, and a particular representation at that, speaks to the emphasis that must be placed on the “perhaps” of the previous sentence and suggests an important distinction between Echenoz’s text and others I will examine below. Of course, those involved in this process of demolition (characters, reading subjects) are not simply collapsing material and psychic buffers to reveal interior conditions of accord or aversion; we are all working toward the revelation of an image (a more or less stable identity; a personal ontology in the face of mortality). And whether this vision directs our subjectivity via a Barthesian “punctum”—that aspect of an image that “pierces” us with its pathos<sup>13</sup>—or not, the fact remains that “like [the book] itself, it can assume depth

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, this final freeze-frame, a “living” image, supplants the billboard, whilst Echenoz’s father and son seek to maintain the mere representation. Another analogy may be found in Louis Malle’s *Damage*, in which the final shot pulls back on a photograph of a father, his dead son, and the son’s fiancé with whom the father has had an affair. In this case, the father’s ongoing contemplation of this image (it takes up a full wall in his new home) suggests a meditation on loss similar to that of Echenoz’s protagonists, along with the potential of being redeemed through the act of living with an acknowledgement of loss.

<sup>12</sup> Fabre will assert that “sun like this . . . really makes you feel like getting outdoors” (Echenoz 13). The final shot of *Red* is, of course, the consequence of the protagonist’s confrontation with the power of nature and, thankfully, her deliverance from its violence.

<sup>13</sup> See Barthes, *Camera Lucida*. 75-77.

only through a substantial leap of ideation on the part of the observer” (Motte, *Small* 101). One’s penchant for engendering ideas and meaning, I argue, is not unrelated to the “texture of consciousness” that comes to color an experience of the minimalist text. As Jullien puts it, “Echenoz’s *morte amoureuse* becomes a vampire, sucking the life out of her men” (56; emphasis in original), but in the process creates “a new sort of mystic in ascetic pursuit of [a] dead wife” (59). In conjunction with the slowly deteriorating image, the final scene (reached nearly as soon as the book is begun) has both men being reduced in appearance, environment, and nutritional intake, and thus performs an ascetic response to the ultimate condition of lived experience—death—from which no one is exempt. And yet, this reality may nevertheless compel one to align his or her own self-“image” with the effort to live simply and authentically, whatever that might mean for the individual. For Paul and Fabre, it means confronting both the death of a mother and wife and the *natural* deterioration of her representation.

Three further literary examples, in brief, one French and two American, are particularly relevant here. I’ll begin with Toussaint’s *The Bathroom* (*Le Salle de Bain*) which, though contrasting his more recent work in both style and length, marks the beginning of a relatively influential writing career known predominantly for its minimalism. The story of an unnamed protagonist who retreats into stasis by moving into his bathroom, *The Bathroom* surely depicts what Robbe-Grillet, referring to the earlier *nouveau roman*, characterizes as “an emotional adventure of the most obsessive kind, to the point of often distorting [the protagonist’s] vision and of producing imaginings close to delirium” (138). And yet, such terms as “delirium” and “emotional” are perhaps too strong to typify Toussaint’s character in so far as he embodies a measured neutrality in the face of such events as foreigners invading his home, an enigmatic invitation from the Austrian embassy, and the challenges of an intimate relationship. He is, in fact, uncommonly detached, whether in moments of conventional crisis or simply in the process of venturing beyond the confines of a lavatory. One may be reminded of Camus’s Mersault from *L’Étranger* or, indeed, Beckett’s own protagonist in *First Love*, though arguably the reader learns even less about Toussaint’s anti-hero than his forerunners. Such anonymity, detachment, and existential and physical immobility are readily apparent in the discourse itself, as we witness in the protagonist’s statement: “A friend of my parents was passing through Paris and came to see me. From him I learned it was raining” (Toussaint 6). No connection with nature here, at least not at this early point in the novel.

Blunt and succinct, Toussaint's language betrays a narrative self whose central crisis is the incapacity (or mere lack of desire) to participate in life (the social, the intimate, the professional, etc.). On the other hand, those actions that unfold in this fiction do so, I would argue, with a distinctive sense of presence, as demonstrated in the novel's shortest chapter, consisting of a single word, "Now" (9), obsessive though the various "nows" of *The Bathroom* may be. In reference to minimalist music composition, Motte's claim that the music "[offers] a series of present moments, an ongoing, extended *now*" (*Small* 20; emphasis in original) is equally applicable to a novel such as *The Bathroom* and, indeed, to most books that exemplify a minimalist aesthetic/sensibility in so far as they orient attention to what is (sometimes painfully) obvious as the inescapable present moment. This series of "nows" constitutes a process that is itself composed of a protagonist's exceptional investment in the minutiae of a given moment. I would argue that it is precisely this investment that repeats, an ongoing orientation of consciousness that is at least initially informed by external forces that push the protagonist further into his or her preoccupations. By "consciousness" I mean to imply, with Hallett, a certain "texture" of self-awareness that is "creative" in so far as it "amplifies" the aggregates of a particular moment and thus one's immediate relationship to being, time, and place.

Hallett speaks of "certain horrors" (17) against which the characters of minimalist fiction posit or enact a given *idée fixe*. She adds, moreover, that "many [such] characters appear to be in psychic or emotional pain; yet few, if any, are looking for healing and few, if any, are seeking rest or shelter from their pain" (17). This claim may be accurate in relation to certain American writers such as Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robinson, who have, despite some of their protestations, come to be known as minimalists. And though the prominence of suffering, however diluted through emotional distance, is readily apparent in minimalist texts, the books under consideration here, both French and American, offer an alternative to absolute stasis in dysfunctional states by virtue of their investment in a process of what I have called depersonalization. To the degree that one becomes depersonalized, the neurotic tendencies that often constitute dysfunction may be diminished, if not altogether abandoned.

Anyone who has accompanied the protagonist of John Hawkes's *Travesty* (1976), however, in the speeding automobile, over the French countryside, destined to crash, knows that the novel is defined by its exploration of dysfunction and the finality of stasis. The driver occupies a space between elegant composure and rage in his aim to kill himself and his passengers—his daughter, his best friend who has

had affairs with both his wife and daughter, and perhaps by extension, his wife, who will doubtless be devastated, secure in their home but a presence in the car nonetheless. He is clearly fixated on the “horror” of his shortcomings, along with his strategy (or “ideation”) for transforming his predicament of being less than his aspirations, if indeed he can be said to have aspirations beyond a self-aggrandizing empowerment. I mention *Travesty* here not only because of its exceptional length and unique jettisoning of predictable narrative, but because, similar to *Plan of Occupancy*, it enacts a staging of our engagement with the text as a, in this case, destructive act. The reader, too, comes to “occupy” the car and the process of negotiation with a killer whose own plan—his ongoing stories and convictions (his is the only voice we hear directly)—enthrall, entertain, and disturb. Moreover, the conclusion finds us ensconced in (or enshrouded by) the inevitability of a “still shot” of “design and debris” (Hawkes 19), a portrait of carnage (which the narrator has already outlined in graphic detail) that portrays “no survivors. None” (128). In this example of the “critical novel,” no one leaves the bathroom alive.

Though I would not go so far as to say that it is referencing its French counterparts, DeLillo’s *The Body Artist*, alternatively, is a book that offers a comparable wit and realism (the reality of death, grief) without allowing its “certain horrors” to dominate. It clearly motions toward an alternative culture of the novel with its focus on a protagonist’s particular “nows,” as well as its page count and diminutive sentence structures. A statement such as “I want to say something but what” (DeLillo 8) echoes Oster’s narrator who also has something to say without the requisite follow-through of conventional narrative, or Gailly’s uncommonly reduced sentences, again demonstrated in a passage from *The Passion of Martin Fissel-Brandt*: “Martin Fissel did. He had to. Leave. He had just spent a week there. Why there? To do what? Relax. Think, maybe. That’s it. An uncontrollable urge to think. About what?” (3).

Echenoz’s father and son, as well as Toussaint’s anonymous protagonist and DeLillo’s Lauren Hartke, unhurried “people in landscapes of estrangement” (31), as DeLillo puts it, each have a great deal to think about. Though just as two mourners make the enormous effort of opening a wall to nature and to the memory of a loved one, and another character eventually leaves the bathroom, Lauren meets her predicament with action, a performance art piece that strips her of everything superfluous to her own grieving process (after having lost her husband, Rey, a filmmaker, to suicide). Most notable among the excess is her personality that, early on, operates according to the unconscious dictates of negligent intimacy with

another and the general contours of a fractured, daily life.<sup>14</sup> The residue of this action takes the form of “a still life that’s living . . . [that] violates the limits of the human” (102, 109) and does so with an exceptional penchant for inhabiting the present moment: “It is happening now. This is what she thought” (89). The “it” here refers to both her tumultuous solitude and the additional character that comes to share that solitude, Mr. Tuttle. Whether a figment of Lauren’s imagination or a material and ultimately mysterious being, the latter becomes a vocal manifestation of Rey, mimicking his voice within the context of statements made in particular (and all ready disjointed) conversations with Lauren. Her lesson in this relationship, this solitude, is that identity is at once fluid and immediate. She will eventually incorporate the phenomenon of Mr. Tuttle into her performance art and thus, her practice of ascetic self-renewal and development.

With one exception, the novelistic worlds one encounters in such texts ultimately depict productive rather than wholly dysfunctional scenarios to the extent that characters come to occupy the present rather than a worrisome past or future, and they do so with the intention, I would argue, of healing.<sup>15</sup> My central claim here is that given the reader’s access to such a world, an admission informed by the many gaps and fissures occupying spaces between words, by the brevity and precision of the novel, he or she is at once challenged by an estrangement from cohesive language structures and invited to share in the productive becomings, to reference Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, of the protagonists.<sup>16</sup> Characters become-other (-action, -movement, -consciousness) in the face of numerous

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<sup>14</sup> Consider the following passage: “‘I know what it is,’ he said. She went to the fridge and opened the door. She stood there remembering something. She said, ‘What?’ Meaning what did you say, not what did you want to tell me. She remembered the soya granules” (DeLillo 11). Lauren’s domestic life (which becomes her only life prior to transitioning to greater self-awareness) after her husband’s suicide follows a similar course, both discursively and psychologically, the distinction between which becomes increasingly slim.

<sup>15</sup> This is especially the case with *Plan of Occupancy*, in which the father and son, though arguably over-invested in the past (of a woman, a dated image), are nevertheless engaged in a form of present ideation, of mutual cathexis, to the end of nurturing their loss. Likewise, DeLillo’s performance artist works through a process of her own loss and shifting identity in the wake of that loss.

<sup>16</sup> On the subject of DeLillo’s protagonist engaged in the act of reading, the narrator asserts that “you become someone else, one of the people in the story, doing dialogue of your own devising. You become a man [or woman] at times, living between the lines, doing another version of the story” (22). I would suggest that this “becoming,” which I will explain in more detail below, is principally indicative of reading a minimalist novel such as *The Body Artist*.

challenges (death, love, a most importantly, stasis).<sup>17</sup> In turn, the reader is given entry into the liminal space of these becomings, the dimensions of which, though reduced, affirm the plenitude of the everyday, of the “now,” a kind of authenticity that is always already qualified by the constructive porosity of selfhood.

Each of the literary texts under investigation here, then, accentuates the “now” as at once a static quality of time and an ultimate inclination to act. This accentuation can be said to arise from the minimalist styles and relative brevity of the texts as well as from the immediacy of confronting nature, a landscape (or more commonly, a minute aspect of that landscape—a red wheelbarrow amidst chickens, rain, for example) that is external to whatever life challenges face the protagonists. The opening paragraph of *The Body Artist*, for example, asserts that “you know more surely who you are on a strong bright day after a storm when the smallest falling leaf is stabbed with self-awareness” (9).<sup>18</sup> Or we might consider the final paragraph of DeLillo’s novel, where Lauren has moved through the agony of her loss and the fragmentation of her identity in the wake of that loss to locate integrity: “She walked into the room and went to the window. She opened it. She threw the window open. She didn’t know why she did this. Then she knew. She wanted to feel the sea tang on her face and the flow of time in her body, to tell her who she was” (124). Though her potential for renewal is clearly more overt than that of Paul and Fabre, each text leaves its central characters peering through a wall, opening to some feature of a natural environment, be it the sea air or the burning sun. And each moment, despite its anchor in action, embodies a level of starkness, a full-stop, a freezing of the frame. As for the protagonist at the conclusion of *The Bathroom*, he explains to his partner “that perhaps it [is] not very healthy, at age twenty-seven going on twenty-nine, to live more or less shut up in a bathroom. I ought to take some risk. . . .” And then, “the next day, [he leaves] the bathroom” (Toussaint 101-02); to receive the air of the outdoors, or the sun, we do not know, though the “now” of his departure is no less immediate or active. The scene provides yet another dénouement that freezes the action of the image, a character’s potential redemption, at a point where there is simply “no more to be said” in the face of a “natural,” immediate moment. Further additions to the action (such as it is) or indeed, to the “nature” of the texts, would be superfluous and thus contribute to unnecessary

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<sup>17</sup> In the case of *Travesty*, of course, we find an example of a text that exhibits a relatively unproductive becoming-death, artful though that death may be.

<sup>18</sup> It is unlikely that the pronoun is haphazard here.

layers of personality or, as Deleuze and Guattari would put it, to the re-territorialization or colonization of the site of a given character.

### **Becoming-Essential**

In light of such potentialities, from the “new man” or woman in whom Robbe-Grillet locates “hope,” the question arises as to the degree to which the becoming of the literary character may extend to the reader. And secondly, we might interrogate the aim of such hope—hope in what? I would like to suggest that the character as deployed in the “critical novel” is akin to Colin Wilson’s well-known “outsider,” one who renounces codifications and embraces the hope of personal, intellectual and spiritual radicalism. A contemporary American manifestation of this becoming-self, from the pages of the minimalist text to the embodied, reading subject, operates, one could argue, in an epoch governed largely and paradoxically by the diminution and the *unproductive* but popular (media) simplification of complex thoughts, emotions, and ideologies. So the transition from textual to extra-discursive self-awareness is not only a theoretical pastime but an imperative to honor and execute, on the part of any reading community, in the ongoing struggle to advance oneself and one’s community beyond cultural limitations. Reading the “critical novel,” according to this imperative, is thus a form of radicalism in any milieu that subjugates the critical faculty to what Deleuze and Guattari would identify as “majoritarian” politics.<sup>19</sup> This is not to suggest that such action is entirely capable of upending the corpulence of a “majoritarian” system, though it may surely play a role in shifting focus from the current “dominant fiction” (be it perpetuated [in bulk] in literature, the media, or in the shopping mall) to the relative spaciousness (and thus relatively de-colonized *Dasein*, or thereness) of a minimalist sensibility.

Obviously there is nothing new in reduction—of literary, artistic, filmic, or subjective properties. And yet Robbe-Grillet seems insistent on the capacity of a “new man” or woman to emerge from the reading and writing culture of the *nouveau roman*. In the view of this study, the new novel of the late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries has as its most promising and direct link to a “new man” the quality of brevity. As characters assume their place in the minimalist text, negotiating the dance between stasis and inevitable transition that constitutes their

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<sup>19</sup> See *A Thousand Plateaus*, where Deleuze and Guattari discuss “the majoritarian as a constant and homogenous system . . . and the minoritarian as a potential, creative and created, becoming” (105-06).



every day, wearing the few fixtures of identity as loose clothing, invariably on the cusp of changing attire, they conspire with the limited page count. They are not given the space to be drawn down to the DNA, the relationship with father, mother, the rich cultural context; and so they labor with the tools at their disposal, the constituents of the immediate moment, the now, toward new becomings. Here, of course, is where the reader may locate his or her own immediacy, in identification with the barest traces of character, with “nothing” that is nonetheless being said with intention.

In so far as the minimalist text invites the reader into its spare but decisive milieu of discursive gestures, it may be said to provoke a conversation. While it may not be accurate to claim that the “critical novel” is necessarily polyphonic or dialogic in Mikhail Bakhtin’s version of Dostoevsky-inspired fiction (in contrast to a novel such as *The Brothers Karamazov*, Toussaint’s *The Bathroom*, for example, appears entirely, and comically, solipsistic), we can claim, with Hubert J. M. Hermans and Harry J. G. Kempen, that certain fiction concentrates a “force” with which “humans, as embodied creatures, can alter their world by inventions and move things into ‘new relationships’” (54). It does so by generating a space of multiplicity in which the juxtaposition, not of characters and their perspectives alone, but of those standpoints of characters and readers alike, “may function as a poetic or artistic means for the exploration of meaning structures emerging from these relationships” (54). In other words, the inherent force of literary concision that characterizes the “critical novel,” the relative immediacy with which it must communicate or “move things,” forges a “writerly” process of engagement between text and reader. The function of this process, I argue, is ultimately, but not only, political in nature.

The politics of literary “nothingness” and its potentiality are not benign. One central question that speaks to the issue of length is why it is acceptable for a writer to publish works of so few pages in France whilst most publishers in the United States, even those with experimental leanings, invariably require more for one’s dollar. Hawkes’s *Travesty*, which happens to take place in France and operates at an especially high intellectual level, comes in at 128 pages and *The Body Artist* concludes at 126, though these are exceptions. Of course, that DeLillo’s novel is an exception in his oeuvre implies the inevitability of his readership confronting the question of length.<sup>20</sup> The general consensus of critics adds an additional and very

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<sup>20</sup> There is, however, a new contender. DeLillo’s most recent novel, *Point Omega*, totals 117 pages. Might this brevity signal a trend in American literature? At the very minimum, it lends

telling layer to this confrontation.<sup>21</sup> Reservations concerning unacceptable book length extend as far as the making of the book itself, as demonstrated by the common assumption on the part of many American book-printing companies that thicker paper (bulk) adds value (or qualifies the book as such).<sup>22</sup> Even Jordan Stump, the translator of numerous contemporary French novels, writes of Toussaint's recent longer fictions as being "of a perfectly respectable length" (98). Stump's valuable contributions (and the lightness with which this comment is likely made) aside, it is tempting to answer the question above by targeting the popular American tendency to embrace the urgency of more, the overindulgence in the notion that bigger is better. Without a convincing alternative, this particular valuation of "respectability" and its unfortunate limitations on American literary values is difficult to ignore.

And yet, like DeLillo's Lauren, I am ultimately more inclined to seek out a productive solution—the intersection of these trans-continental fictions and, specifically, the audiences that come to occupy them. To extend Motte's category of this literature as the "critical novel," Deleuze and Guattari's well-documented notion of "minor literature" is useful in so far as it identifies what they call such literature's "deterritorializing" function (its subversive and transformative capacity for appropriating conventional or "major" language and narrative structures) as well as its imperative of galvanizing an equally revolutionary readership. Indeed, "everything in [this literature] is political" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka* 17). On the margins of traditional fiction, the "minor" writer undertakes the project of "[expressing] another possible community and [forging] the means for another consciousness and another sensibility," such a project that "is determined to fill the conditions of a collective enunciation that is lacking elsewhere in this milieu: *literature is the people's concern*" (17-18; emphasis in original). These "conditions," I would argue, are well met by Motte's aforementioned characterization of the "critical novel." However, the revolutionary potential that I am attributing to the reader of this text is not what DeLillo might call the "self-strutting" (107) of a

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credence to the prospects of a "new" transcontinental novel whose value will be measured in literary substance rather than in bulk. On the other hand, American critics do not appear eager to shift critique to the former when the latter is abandoned.

<sup>21</sup> See Foden or Ball.

<sup>22</sup> For what it's worth, a friend and editor for a major North American educational publishing house, as well as for a separate independent literary publisher, has assured me via personal correspondence that adding value by adding bulk is "industry shorthand" (di Santo), a largely unspoken but common practice. As a writer of relatively short novels myself, I can certainly attest to the tendency of North American publishers to find a novel under 150 pages to be "far too short."

performative dissidence. On the contrary, the becoming-communal or individual sensibility is one that unfolds in concert with a language of “subtraction and variation . . . achieved by stretching tensors through” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand* 105) that language and, ideally, through the reading subject himself or herself.

To clarify, my intention here is ultimately to illustrate the potentiality of a parallel unfolding (or folding into one another) of the minimalist text and the reading subject. A text such as *Plan of Occupancy* stands at the center of this enterprise both for its extreme limitation of length and for its ambiguous meaning but no less spacious *function*. This function finds its own clarity in the intention “to stage our reading of the text as a construction [such as that of a family’s efforts to retain some sense of unification], asking us to experience the same constraints, the same frustrations, that he [Echenoz] and Fabre confront as we in turn labor to build coherence” (Motte, *Small* 106). It is the integrity gained from moving through challenges, repetitively, attentively, consciously, that finally indicates health and well-being, an unending process constituted by “nows” always already available to one’s awareness. That the “coherence” to which Motte refers clearly implies essentialism is indicative of a relatively unique strain of postmodern fiction. “Minimalism’s philosophical stance,” he asserts, is essentialist in character” (5), a notion that gestures toward a core ontology of the self in a literary and intellectual milieu conventionally preoccupied with fragmentation.<sup>23</sup> Despite the commonplace ruptures of identity and banal experience that color a life, there is a “something” around which subjective features cohere, a core that is at once interrogated and nurtured in the “critical novel” and invited to *act* on behalf of the self’s wellbeing. The paradox, of course, is that “something” may assume the form of “nothing” and provoke a “new” readership whose disentanglement from baroque literary qualities may actually empower the self that reads by virtue of textual engagement. As I have suggested above, such form, or style, eliminates superfluous language that otherwise contributes to socially-constructed subjectivity. The essentialist character of minimalism, then, does not exalt an unadulterated selfhood, a Cartesian cogito, or an Orwellian homogeneity, as demonstrated by the predominant alienation of its literary characters and obviously varying cultural contexts. Rather, such essentialism points to the paradoxically essentialist nature of becoming, a process in which every being is always already engaged, consciously or otherwise.

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<sup>23</sup> See Hassan.

According to Deleuze scholar Bruce Baugh, “great works intensify life, and life is intensified in us when we encounter them. No matter what your specific aims and purposes, an intensification of *power* and of a feeling for life will better equip you to accomplish them, for power is a matter of ‘being able,’ a capacity for doing things” (52; emphasis in original). Despite, and indeed, because of their brevity, their minimalism, among other qualities, the texts under consideration here, I would argue, are great works in which the circumstances and power of life are intensified. Characters are stripped of excess material and psychic effects, they become-other and ultimately assume a nature of relative authenticity, qualified, as I have suggested, by the inherent fluidity of any (obsessive) becoming and, as is well-known by readers of the “critical novel,” a ludic sense of self and socio-cultural environment. Part of such authenticity entails a facility for *doing*, or “being able.”<sup>24</sup> I have demonstrated this capacity in the lives of specific fictional characters and am claiming, along with Baugh, that the intensification of this capacity, a sense of empowerment via the minimization of unnecessary accoutrements of conventional selfhood, transfers from fiction to the real for the conscientious reader. That such development may issue from an amalgam of the serious and the comic (the opening line of *Plan of Occupancy*: “Since everything had burned—the furniture, the mother, and the photographs of the mother—for Fabre and his son, Paul, it immediately meant a lot of work” [Echenoz 3]; the central trope of *The Bathroom*; the nearly unnoticeable flattening of a cute mammal when driving at high speeds—“Yes, it was a rabbit” [Hawkes 35]; a performance artist whose hair becomes “terroristic” [DeLillo 105]) only adds to the pleasure as well as the intensification of the reader’s encounter with fiction.

There may well be an inimitable quality to the “critical [French] novel,” though what I hope to have established is not only the possibility that certain of its primary characteristics are portable across literatures and oceans, but that there is something essential in erecting this bridge, to a “beyond,” as Robbe-Grillet puts it, however variable or fleeting this territory may be. I would argue that all cultures and peoples share a tendency, however fleeting, toward self-effacement (or depersonalization) to the degree that human nature periodically requires a metaphorical desquamation, a reduction of solipsistic impulses, in spite of powerful, collective impulses to the contrary and varying cultural contexts. Meanwhile, the egregious repudiation of “the French” by rightwing America, though clearly

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<sup>24</sup> Even *Travesty*’s protagonist locates a capacity for doing, for acting, through the repetition inherent to his “plan” (driving, talking) until the inevitable, abrupt stillness consumes him and the objects of his rage.

multifaceted, exemplifies the profound limitations of a cultural and, indeed, literary sensibility committed to provincial impulses, impulses that nurture what is arguably a self-defeating premise of canonized girth.<sup>25</sup> Without judging the baroque, the conventional, sweeping epic, it remains possible to embrace the minimalist text, from either side of the ocean, and to learn from the immensity and immediacy of its ideas, on which it has relatively little to say.

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<sup>25</sup> Historical examples of American Francophobia abound, though perhaps the most notorious (and absurd) in recent years is the well-known congressional rechristening of French Fries to Freedom Fries on their cafeteria menu in 2003 as a response to France's lack of support of the Iraq war. Political motivations, of course, are never divorced from larger cultural issues.

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Thomas Phillips is a composer, novelist, and teacher whose creative work focuses on minimalist music and fiction. He has composed music for installations, dance, and theatre and taught in the disciplines of literature and fine arts at various universities in the US, Québec, and Finland. Having completed his interdisciplinary Ph.D. at Concordia University in Montréal, he currently lives in the US, where he teaches literature at North Carolina State University. In addition to numerous CD releases, he is the author of *Long Slow Distance* (Object Press, 2009), *Insouciance* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2011), *Ensemble* (8<sup>th</sup> House Publishing, forthcoming 2013) and the scholarly monograph *The Subject of Minimalism: On Aesthetics, Agency, and Becoming* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

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