

***The
Nothing
That Is***

Johanna
Skibsrud

***Essays
on Art,
Literature
and Being***

The Nothings That Is

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*Essays
on Art,
Literature
and Being*

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IMAGE CREDITS:

p. 16: *Null Object: Gustav Metzger thinks about nothing* (Studio shot). By London Fieldworks (Bruce Gilchrist & Jo Joelson). Photo by Bruce Gilchrist (London Fieldworks), 2012. Used with permission.

p. 17: *Null Object: Gustav Metzger thinks about nothing* (Installation shot, Bluecoat Gallery). By London Fieldworks (Bruce Gilchrist & Jo Joelson). Photo by Jon Barraclough, 2014. Used with permission.

I. THE NOTHING THAT IS

There is nothing I can say. 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.

This description of a non-writing yet to come—from a late essay by Marguerite Duras titled “Writing”—is also a description of the poetic approach already underlying every one of her diverse creative texts (novels, plays, essays, and films). And yet Duras is right to cast the possibility of “non-writing” into the future. To write, and to read, poetically is to cast beyond the perceivable limits of language and temporal being. As Michael Eskin puts it in *Ethics and Dialogue*, poetry “unsays” ontology. It speaks not from, or to, simple presence, but from the pre-ontological grounds whereupon “nothing” becomes “something.” In other words, poetic writing challenges ontology by revealing and questioning the very grounds against which we perceive, and figure, “being.” 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 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"—described as "nothing himself"—emphasizes the capacity of poetry to test the limits of both subjectivity and discourse. It ultimately engages the reader in an unlikely encounter at the end of the poem with both "[n]othing that is not there and the nothing that is."

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—in both cases—radically withheld.¹ 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 "nothing," "speaker" and "listener," "subject" and "object," "being" and "non-being," to reveal the ongoing process of interpretation that precedes—and makes possible—both experiential and linguistic access to being, meaning, and form. What the poem ultimately represents, then, is 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 in *Things Merely Are*, "achieves truth through emotional identification, where actor and audience fuse, becoming two-in-one." This "fusion" is usually conceived of in abstract terms, but it might equally be conceived of as a concrete space of encounter. Poetry—I argue—creates a point of potential contact and exchange by preserving the difference between the (known) parameters of the subject and/or art-object and the (unknown) other.

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 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 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 50-centimetre cube of 145-million-year-old Portland stone. What we confront in *Null Object* is a depiction of the point of contact between “something” and “nothing,” as well as between the conceptual and the non-conceptual. The material heft and sheer size of the art object can be neither abstracted nor ignored. Even the negative space at its centre 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 Portland stone, London Fieldworks represents the way that the “null” subject is rendered legible *as* a subject in contradistinction to the “null” object it helped define.

While Stevens’s “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 three-dimensional and 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 fuller understanding of 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—and in the narrower one suggested by Stevens in his essay “The Necessary Angel”: poets should, Stevens writes in this essay, “help people live their lives.”² To “not-write,” according to Duras’s use of the term, is an ethics in both of these senses. It is a resistance to the grammar of finite and self-enclosed subjectivity—and thus a resistance to the equation of self and world. It is also a commitment to locating within each word (“without supporting grammar”) the point at which language touches upon, but fails to grasp, what *shapes* language by remaining utterly beyond it. To “not-write” is thus to arrive at a way of attending to what poet and theorist Fred Moten calls “difference without separability”³—and of locating within every perceivable power structure the real presence of what we can’t, or can’t *yet*, see or understand.

II. ADDRESS CIRCUITS AND CONTACT ZONES

Addressed to no one in particular, “The Snow Man” can be considered an “overheard meditation, writes Jonathan Culler in *Theory of the Lyric*. It functions like the rhetorical figure of apostrophe: an “address to the reader by means of address to something or someone else.” 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 depersonalizing process as it progresses via the subtraction of human faculties: intellect, sight, feeling, and hearing. By the final stanza, it is 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 different linguistic and ontological expressions of “nothing” in the poem direct us toward a confrontation with the limits of perception and representation, inviting us to conceive of 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 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.” It allows 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, prelinguistic 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 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 subjectivity 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?” Moten’s answer—and Steven’s, too—is to study the “thingly presence” of the poem.

III. “POESIS, POESIS”

Although poetry maintains a unique relationship to what exceeds the bounds of 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—we should 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.” “The poet, to be a poet,” writes Della Volpe in *Critique of Taste*, “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 “truth” and those of other rational and intellectual procedures. For poetry, the “truth and reality of things” is not something that already exists and with which the poet and the reader must “come to grips”; instead, truth is made available to poetry only through a process of interpretation wherein poet, speaker, and reader become intimately involved in the pursuit of 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 in *The Man Without Content*, by which something “passe[s] from nonbeing into being, thus opening a space of truth.” 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.”⁶

Stevens’s “The Snow Man” can be understood as a concerted attempt at articulating what Critchley calls this “enlarged world of fact,” opening within “the literal characters” of representation the vatic

possibility of encounter with what escapes, refuses, or is denied representation. 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.” Like other invocatory discourses, such as oath and prayer, poetry—as Aristotle writes in *Poetics*—is “*non-apophantic*,” meaning a way of speaking that cannot be understood definitively as either “true” or “false.” “The nothing that is” expresses the *non-apophantic* structure not just of poetry but of all language; the phrase thus makes perceptible the *non-actual* as grounds for the emergence of both subject and meaning. In other words: Stevens’s fictive encounter with nothingness at the end of “The Snow Man” creates a *factual* basis for new articulations of the subject.

IV. NULL OBJECT

The lyric model involves a subject’s address to the thingly quality of what exceeds it. This mode of address is its ethics. By speaking past the bounds of both the subject and the poem, lyric emphasizes not only the limits of subjectivity but also the possibility of crossing them. Culler refers to lyric address as “triangulated,” implying fixed and singular identities for speaker, reader, and object of address—and a relatively straightforward connective path between them. The configuration of these entities in lyric poetry is rarely that simple, however, as each “point of view” often serves to undermine or “unsay,” rather than definitely assert, its position. To illustrate this complexity, I propose turning to the London Fieldworks installation *Null Object*, which illustrates a variation on the lyric model and its ethical stakes. *Null Object* is a project that—like the formulation “the nothing that is”—resists easy categorization as either “something” or “nothing,”

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.” 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 forms both a gap and an opening—and can be understood to be both created *of*, and created *by*, its material conditions. That is, even though the negative shape at the core of *Null Object* presents an absence, the process of rendering that absence marks the specifically local and material nature of the subject it describes. The art object is not, in other words, an absent-minded record of abstract thought but 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*. 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 in order to become “the continuous ground behind the negative space.” Rather than a traditional figure-ground relationship, where the borders of the subject are perceived as belonging to the figure alone, poetry presents, and allows us to explore, the porousness of borders and the continuity of the spaces they delimit—wherein a 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, but a negative space of confluence and potential engagement between the abstracted or unrecognized subject and the (almost literal) concrete. This tentative representation affords both an awareness and a potential unsettling of the lines according to which the “abstract” subject has been drawn. Who, or what, *Null Object* prompts us to ask, is being hollowed out by whom?

Null Object helps us to conceptualize the “inconceivable” relationship implicit within poetry between “something” and “nothing,” as well as the way in which subjectivity *actually touches upon* its material conditions. Metzger’s thoughts “about nothing” articulate themselves only via their contact with “something”—in this case, a 50-centimetre 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 these limits, Stevens presents “nothing” 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 while evoking an imagined unity between thinking and material being, as well as between space and time, *Null Object* reminds us that there is a limit to the subject. That limit is precisely the poem’s object. By formally addressing itself to the infinite without the infinite receding into a definitionless void, poetry establishes a conceptual interface between the two terms. It creates the possibility of encounter with the unknown and the other by demonstrating this interface as essential to, and indeed constitutive of, individual human being. ^

Culler writes that lyric poetry’s “apostrophic wish”—“that the things of the earth function as *thous* when addressed”—renders these things, in the process of transformation, “at least in part invisible, conceptual rather than material.” It is, perhaps, not 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.” But because poetic address is ultimately directed beyond the limits of the framing subject, it often results instead, as Culler argues, in “a surprisingly strong sense of prophetic revelation.” (“Someday,” wrote Marguerite Duras, “it will come.”).

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, it also engages distinct ethical and imaginative possibilities through what Charles Altieri has called, in *Wallace Stevens and the Demands of Modernity*, “aspectual thinking.” Rather than being prescriptive or ontological, poetry is speculative and prophetic—its discourse dictated not by what “is” or even what “seems,”⁷ but by 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, and, 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 what Christopher Tyler calls “the mind-bending confrontation between nothing and infinity.” This confrontation 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, as Tyler writes, “the infinite value of the energy at every point in empty space” from which all objects derive their finite structure.

London Fieldworks explains in their introduction to *Null Object* that the subtractive process through which a void space is created connects the concept of a limit or threshold of thought to the limit of material form. The “evanescent” quality of the work can thus be understood as a fading “into the unthought, not as something external to thought but something at the very heart of thinking.” “The nothing that is” functions similarly by describing what cannot be described—the infinite, the other, the unknown—as “the very heart of” both language and being. In this way, the phrase expresses the ethics fundamental to poetry as the abnegation and, at the same time, the implicit revealing of subjective and linguistic limits. The subject both exists and does not: “there is nothing I can say. There is nothing I can write.” And the poem itself is already a kind of “non-writing”—rendering language and subjectivity vulnerable to both the possibility of becoming otherwise, and of never having been.