

MINIMA SEMANTICA

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Abstract Modernity is sometimes characterised as a dialectic between inherited dualisms – macro-microcosm, cosmos-mind, schema-trope, maximalism-minimalism, etc. – reinscribed, in the computer-age, within the emerging discourses of complexity-simplicity & given a broadly “cybernetic” inflection, corresponding to the operations of dynamic systems. The autopoietic character of such systems is the subject of a large body of literature. That semantics in general can be understood in these terms is a fundamental prerequisite for the recent advent of language-based AI, which in a very short period has become ubiquitous. While a statistical model of communication, refined into a calculus of “intelligence,” may seem to resolve the old antagonism of the sensible-intelligible, in crucial respects it remains at the level of a *mimēsis* – a descriptive-approximative system – so long as it retains a dualistic (& not recursive-differential) structure. Signification's capacity *to arise in the first place* is no more mysterious than the existence of the Higgs field. The question remains: what – under arbitrarily assumed conditions – constitutes a semantic minimum? i.e., a difference that “means”? This minimum can be conceived as a Planck limit (or some other universal bound), necessitating a convergence of the semantic field. Yet while the opacity of AI is unsuited to a general theory of semantic emergence, re-examination of certain paradigmatic modernist texts – whose linguistic economies are often held to be diametrically opposed, but which reveal “intrapsychic identifications” (Kristeva) – may be more fruitful.

Keywords Semiology, technopoetics, textual cybernetics, mimesis, posthumanism, maximalism, minimalism, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett.

So why, pray, sign anything as long as every word, letter, penstroke, paperspace is a perfect signature of its own? —
James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26424/philobib.2025.30.1.08>.

Across a body of writing, from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939) to Samuel Beckett's *The Unnameable* (1958) and beyond, it is possible to speak of a "poetics" of inscriptive-erasure (a semantic minimum) correlative with a crisis in the ideology of representation. A crisis of long-gestation – from Plato to cybernetics – given critical impetus in the serial ruptures and "Copernican revolutions" of modernity. Some of these are still being brought into view, notably in the wake of artificial intelligence, quantum complexity and the ubiquitous nature of digital economies. Both Joyce and Beckett's texts were written after the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics (1925-1927) – on indeterminacy and complementarity – and Alan Turing's "On Computable Numbers, with an Application to the Entscheidungsproblem" (1936), setting forth the hypothesis of a "universal machine." Together, these doctrines articulated a fundamental crisis in the relation of "intelligibility" to "intelligence" whose ramifications, far from being restricted to the rarefied discourses of mathematical theory, have become increasingly ubiquitous aspects of "everyday life."

In Philip K. Dick's 1981 novel, *The Divine Invasion*, a character meditates – in McLuhanesque fashion – on the technopoetics of *Finnegans Wake*, a seemingly prophetic work of future communications technologies, itself a kind of anachronistic machine for producing the kind of parallel universe in which PKD's own narrative unfolds. "It's impossible," Dick's character says, "that James Joyce could have mentioned 'talk-tapes' in his writing" insisting that "*Finnegans Wake* is an information pool based on computer memory systems that didn't exist until a century after James Joyce's era... Joyce was plugged into a cosmic consciousness from which he derived the inspiration for his entire corpus of work."¹ Today, with the Wakean evolution of Turing Machines into Generative Adversarial Networks and Large Language Model AIs unfolding "in plain view," the anachronism of Dick's science fictional "cosmic consciousness" is – as he himself well anticipated – rendered moot. The algorithmic circuits, random noise and generative erasurism of today's reality discriminators are still as "prehistoric child's toys" to the transdimensional "joyceware" of *Finnegans Wake*, perhaps – this "hypermnestic machine," as Derrida says (ventriloquizing PKD), "capable of integrating all the variables, all the quantitative and qualitative factors... because you can say nothing that is not programmed on this 1000th generation computer – *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*."²

Claude Shannon, in his 1948 paper on "A Mathematical Theory of Communication,"³ identified *Finnegan's Wake* as a type of entropy machine, in which language operate at the lowest threshold of redundancy (or upper threshold of compressibility) – a cybernetic system

¹ Philip K. Dick, *The Divine Invasion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 15. "You think James Joyce was crazy, is that what you think? Okay; then explain to me how come he mentions 'talktapes' which means audio tapes in a book he wrote starting in 1922 and which he completed in 1939, before there were tape recorders! You call that crazy? He also has them sitting around a TV set – in a book started four years after World War 1..."

² Jacques Derrida "Two Words for Joyce," *Post-structuralist Joyce: Essays from the French*, eds. Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 147-148.

³ Claude Shannon, "A Mathematical Theory of Communication," *Bell System Technical Journal* 27 (July, October, 1948): 394.

operating at what we might call the Planck-limit “of the calculable and the incalculable.”⁴ Shannon identifies this semantic minimum of sublexical “difference” as the introduction of a blank – “paperspace” in Wake – itself a mark of ambivalence, inscriptive-erasure, the prior condition of any signification as such. This minimum unit would seem to stand in inverse relation to the work required to describe the signifying system it underwrites, which in *Finnegans Wake* assumes a maximum of complexity and which in *The Unnameable* assumes (in place of complexity as such) a minimalist interminability – in each case, the infinitesimal stands in a direct relation to the exponential, while each likewise concerns itself with defining a bounding limit (analogous to the Planck limit for the division of space and the Bekenstein limit for the maximal amount of information required to describe a given system down to the quantum level). Where Joyce’s text has often been described as maximalist to Beckett’s minimalism, we might better speak of their complementary “dymaxionism” (to borrow Fuller’s term) in which complexity and simplicity are generatively interdependent.⁵ Joyce’s combinatory “nat language”⁶ and Beckett’s cybernetic routines and subroutines encode within themselves the processes of their own inscription, deletion, reinscription and computation, producing what *Finnegans Wake* calls a “proteiform graph... polyhedron of scripture.”⁷ In this sense, both Joyce and Beckett’s texts aren’t a *mimēsis* of some futuristic word-technology, but “auto-productive” Universal Turing Machines in which a certain meaning of authorship is erased at the same time as other meanings are inscribed in its place.

Horreur Chosésque

It’s unsurprising that a certain status of *the author* and a certain fetishism of *authorship* should share their history with the advent of the mechanised printing press, mass literacy and the global dominance of one form or another of capitalist ideology. We can say with a degree of certainty, that contemporaneous with automated production arose the idea of an autonomous authorial subjectivity vested in a body of writing. Writing, in a sense, came to *produce* its authorship, in a broadly cybernetic, algorithmic process of abstraction and feedback, defining what we might call its ideal commodity. In prototype, this evolution from writing machines to machinic writing provides the subject of Michel Foucault’s 1969 Collège de France lecture, “Qu’est-ce du’un

⁴ Derrida “Two Words for Joyce,” 148.

⁵ As marking a convergence upon a proto-artificial intelligence, this generative interdependence may also be thought of as what Julia Kristeva calls “intrapsychic identifications” – see “Joyce ‘the Gracehoper’ or the Return of Orpheus,” *James Joyce: The Augmented Ninth*, ed. Bernard Benstock (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988) 169).

⁶ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber, 1939) 83.12.

⁷ “The proteiform graph itself is a polyhedron of scripture. There was a time when naïf alphabetters would have written it down the tracing of a purely deliquescent recidivist, possibly ambidextrous, snubnosed probably and presenting a strangely profound rainbow in his (or her) occiput.” Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 107.08-12.

auteur?"⁸ in which – after quoting Beckett's *Texts for Nothing* ("What does it matter who is speaking")⁹– he proposed that

Writing unfolds like a game that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits. In writing, the point is not to manifest or exalt the act of writing, nor is it to pin a subject within language; it is, rather, a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears.

If the Platonic father-of-the-logos is dead, each logos becomes its own "father" in a double movement of erasure and self-inscription. This decentering movement has multiplied along each of its peripheries: devolving from the erased, suspended, phantasmatic form of the "transcendental signified" onto a "free-play of signifiers" that seemingly erupts in its absence.¹⁰ What's notable in this formulation, is that this space of *disappearance* is the work, precisely, of an *excess* – of what we might call the *surplus-value* of a writing that *goes on* and whose transgressions are *invariable* (in other words, as probabilistically determined as Neumann and Morgenstern's 1944 *Theory of Games and Economic Behaviour*, for example).¹¹ Foucault's allusion is markedly not that of the Romantic author-revolutionary, or the performative individualism that characterises the idea of "transgressive writing" throughout the so-called Modernist period, including much that has come to pass for a critique of the Cult of the Author itself. There is no doubt something deeply paradoxical about the personality cults manifest within precisely those critiques of industrial-era ideological excess. Nevertheless, the authorial agency Foucault begins to elaborate is rather one bound, in a seemingly counter-intuitive movement, to a constitutive "alienation." In this we can detect echoes of a series of elusive observations recorded by Marx in the *Grundrisse*, in which individuated subjectivity is said to be *produced* by mechanisation: it is produced, in other words, through the very alienation *into which it constantly disappears*.¹²

At base, then, the question of the status of authorship is a question about the crisis of Humanism.

Or to put it otherwise, it is a question about the crisis *at the heart of Humanism*. For it is this "crisis," in which the genealogy of *technological innovation* resides, that has come to the fore in

⁸ Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" *Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: New Press, 1998), 206.

⁹ Samuel Beckett, "Texts for nothing" [Text 3], *The Complete Short Prose 1929–1989*, ed. Stan Gontarski (New York: Grove, 1995), 109.

¹⁰ An engendered-engendering "difference minimum" whose theoretical genealogy has been mapped from Hélène Cixous' *écriture féminine* to the "Cyberfeminist Manifesto" of VNS Matrix and Laboria Cubonik's *xenofeminism*.

¹¹ See John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behaviour* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944).

¹² Karl Marx, *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie* (posthumous 1939–41), published in English as *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973).

the various posthumanist strains of thought to have emerged particularly in the second half of the twentieth century and which overlap with Beckett's later, broadly "cybernetic," writings. It is possible to read Beckett in this context as closely concerned with the relation of authorship to *semantic labour* and the representation of power (and representation *as* power). Recalling his commentary on *Finnegans Wake*,¹³ we can recognise in Beckett's own work, particularly of this period, a world in which writing *is* ontology; action *is* subjectivisation – such that the act of writing itself, the theatre of its "self-presentation," constitutes a kind of *catastrophic agency*. Agency as the mechanism of a certain "turn": between the production of a *space of representation* and *its own (violent) disappearance*. Time and again in Beckett's writing catastrophe raises its head, in a play between "explicitation" – as the "Director" says in his 1982 theatre-piece for Havel, with "every i dotted to death" – and a staged appeal to *affect* as by-product of an unbearable scrutiny; of interrogation routines, inspection routines, routines of unpresentable disclosure, ellipsis, repetition, subjection, technicity.

Unsurprising, then, that Beckett should occupy a position of pre-eminence in Deleuze and Guattari's examination of "machinic desire," in their 1972 collaboration *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*,¹⁴ anticipating the somewhat apocalyptic thought of latter-day Accelerationism: an emancipative critique of capitalism by way of "ever-accelerating catastrophes" toward "the coming annihilations" – as Alec Williams and Nick Srnicek phrase it in their "Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics."¹⁵ Yet there's a powerful ambivalence in Beckett's writing to those breeds of naïve catastrophist thought that seek to affirm themselves in the illusion of a transcendental "nihilism." All too often Beckett has been read as the author not, like Joyce, of a *revolution of the word*, but of an *abolition of language*: a radical Sartrean intent upon transgressing the limits of discursive agency to the "horreur chosesque"¹⁶ or nightmare-thingness beyond. Yet if anything can be said to affirm itself at this "catastrophic" limit of signification and base materiality it is rather a kind of *surplus minimum*: something, that is to say, instead of nothing. Or rather, *something more* instead of nothing. And here lies the real paradox at the heart of Beckett's writing, for, as Žižek elsewhere observes in the thinking of Meister Eckhart, "Nothing does not come for free, it is not a zero-point at which the universe is just 'resting for itself' ... nothing has to be sustained by an investment of energy."¹⁷

Beckett's *surplus minimum*, then, represents a least possible investment, sustained not by an existentialist *recoil* from the abyss of nothingness, but by a process of *catalytic conversion*

¹³ "His [Joyce's] writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself* [...] when the sense is sleep, the words go to sleep [...] when the sense is dancing, the words dance." Samuel Beckett, "Dante... Bruno, Vico.. Joyce," *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (New York: New Directions Press, 1962) 14.

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem, and H.R. Lane (New York: Viking, 1977).

¹⁵ Alec Williams and Nick Srnicek, "Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics" (2013): §3.

¹⁶ Samuel Beckett, "The Calmative" [1946], *Nouvelles et Textes pour rien* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1958) 69.

¹⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2014) 393-4.

in which the nothing stands in place of an unobtainable *object*: no longer of desire but rather of a “primordial” compulsion-to-repeat. The “nothing” thus assumes the semantic function of what Žižek calls “the paradox of a *thing* which is always (and nothing but) *an excess with regard to itself*.”¹⁸ An ideal commodity, in other words. In his 1992 introduction to *Quad and Other Plays for Television*,¹⁹ Deleuze – continuing a line of argument from *Anti-Oedipus* – sought to negotiate this paradox in terms both of machinic desire and what Guattari had termed “planes of consistency”: the deployment of desire according to an axiomatic system. For Deleuze, unlike purely structural axiomatics, “the axiomatics of desire *includes the principle of non-consistency*.”²⁰ Consequently, the ever-increasing insistence in Beckett’s writing on rigid structures of denomination – however seemingly parodic (like Krapp’s banana skin, or the eroticism of *What Where*) – could be seen as corresponding to an increasing susceptibility to paranoia and contradiction, producing a kind of “disjunctive synthesis.” For Deleuze, this “synthesis” takes place around a locus of *exhaustion*, which likewise exhibits contradictions: for example, between Beckett’s theatrical mechanics and the nominal agency of its “protagonists,” represented by the figure of the “exhausted man” (as distinct from the “fatigued man” who “still has possibilities even if he cannot realise them, unlike the exhausted man, who has none”²¹). For Deleuze, the subject (protagonist) “exhausts himself by exhausting the possible.” This occurs in four stages: 1. by creating series of exhausting things; 2. drying-up the flux of voices; 3. extinguishing the potentialities of space; 4. dissipating the power of the image. In this way, the “exhausted” is also the “exhaustive.”²²

Psychotic Foreclosures

The exhausted man’s approach to the *im*-possible broadly corresponds to the situation of *alienated subject* whose access to History is “blocked.” Yet, by the same token, it’s necessary to recognise that Beckett’s protagonists are only ever *phantasms* of such an “exhausted possibility,” since *the possible* is always elsewhere: not as some *prior* (and now depleted) *agency*, but as the future horizon of a radical *determinism*. What *goes on* evokes a beyond-of-the-possible only in the manner in which Freud speaks of a “beyond” of the fundamental drives – being “nothing more” than a *compulsion to repeat* – what Lacan later comes to call *the void of jouissance*.²³ The tendency of Beckett’s writing is not so much post-dramatic in this respect, as *sub-dramatic*: there’s always *something below* the theatrical minimum – and thus “below” the

¹⁸ Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, 386 – emphasis added.

¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *L’épuisé* (Paris: Minuit, 1992) 57-78.

²⁰ Félix Guattari, “Planes of Consistency’ [1971], *The Anti-Oedipus Papers*, ed. Stéphane Nadaud, trans. Kéline Gotman (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006), 283.

²¹ François Dosse, *Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: Intersecting Lives*, trans. Deborah Glassman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 448.

²² Ctd in Dosse, *Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari*, 448.

²³ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. C.J.M. Hubback ([1919] London: The Hogarth Press, 1922).

representational threshold of an *enaction-of-nothing*. Hence the signification of foreclosure, of an exhaustion or point-of-no-return, is constantly being *sub-verted*. For Beckett, this indeed is the very *possibility of writing*, in which repetition – while appearing as a movement of depletion, of a terminal narrowing-of-the-odds – provides a singular tactical advantage. Appearing on the one hand to be an incremental acceleration towards annihilation, and on the other a drastic collapse into terminal stasis, this event-horizon nevertheless describes the very *opening of possibility*. As in Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*, repetition here doesn't abolish "chance" – such that, like Mallarmé's "All thought is a throw of dice," we might also say ALL "WRITING" IS REPETITION – and it is this repetition itself which, by a kind of metabolic sublimation, is the guarantee that writing "goes on."

We can see this, for example, in *Krapp's Last Tape*, whose setting is specified in the stage directions as "A late evening in the future,"²⁴ and whose present action is constituted by a ritual interaction with "a tape-recorder with microphone and a number of cardboard boxes containing reels of recorded tapes," representing a kind of primal scene of History which it is the (prematurely aged) protagonist's function to replay. The action is situated, in other words, in a zone of pure anachronism, as a spatiotemporal apparatus that produces its own repetition. In this way possibility is constantly inaugurated as a kind of reflexive-forethrow: an algorithmic system in which every "last" feedback acquires the status of +1. Repetition, in this self-ramifying aspect, appears therefore both as opening of minimal possibility and as perpetual check, or what Deleuze calls a "psychotic foreclosure": a foreclosure "which operates in the symbolic order at the very level of the 'signifier,' a kind of hole in the structure, an empty place, which causes whatever is foreclosed in the symbolic to *reappear* as hallucination in the real."²⁵ This delirium, of the hallucinated encounter between the "symbolic" and the "real," corresponds in Beckett to that crisis of Humanism in which the subject – as presumed author of its own actions – is suspended as a locus of perpetually re-enacted disappearance.

Throughout Beckett's work we encounter the lineaments of a subjective "catastrophism" presented alternately as humanistic farce and dehumanised compulsion: the entropically routinised surplus-labour of a machinic "abstract individualism." From the cyclic redundancy of *waiting* as both time-consuming labour and deferred gratification in *Waiting for Godot*, to the repetitive circuits of stone-sucking in *Molloy*,²⁶ to the "succession of irregular loops, now sharp and short as in the waltz, now a parabolic sweep" in *The Unnameable*, to the rigidified teleological impulses (redolent of pacing the perimeter of a prison yard) in *Quad*, Beckett's mechanomorphisms chart a topology of *constricted excess*: a seemingly paradoxical logic that sustains obvious parallels to the mass-standardisation and hyperproduction of the Fordist assembly-line, itself the model of culture industry "shock work." Like Soviet-era *udarny trud* – euphemistically superproductive "enthusiastic" labour – Beckett's textual machines are

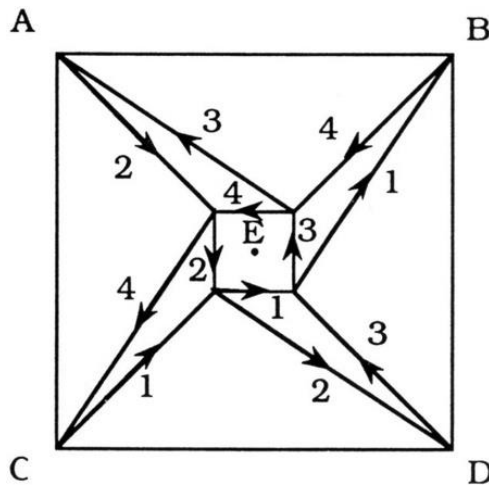
²⁴ Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatical Works* (London: Faber, 1986), 213.

²⁵ Gilles Deleuze, "Schizophrenia and Society," *Two Regimes of Madness, Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975–1995*, ed. D. Lapoujade, trans. A. Hodge and M. Taormina (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006), 24 – emphasis added.

²⁶ A parody of Sartre's pebble-on-the-beach materialist ontology in *La Nausée* (1938).

the operative *stuff* of an all-encompassing semiocapitalism: the routinisation of language, signifier, commodity, which produces – through its *perpetual exhaustion* – endlessly distracting, absorbing, vacant, nihilistic extensions of itself *ad infinitum* (the alchemical transubstantiation of shit into ideal signifier and back into shit again) in a conspicuously contrived display of “jouissance.”²⁷ Whether as quasi-euphoric, farcically emancipative self-parody or austere, rigidly bound inanition, Beckett’s allegories of industrial alienation are first and foremost *operative*: allegorical *because* machinic;²⁸ alienational because constitutive of an imaginary subjectivity that *goes on* for no other reason.²⁹

This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the fixed camera and strict permutational schema for *Quad* (comprising movement, light, sound, costumes), in which an apparently closed system of rigid denomination is locked in orbit around a kind of blackhole or “danger zone. Hence deviation,”³⁰ from whose negative presence the menace of *unpresentability* seems to exude. Like Malevich’s *Black Square*, signifying possibility isn’t negated but produced via a template of *abstraction*.



Likewise subjectivity, for Beckett, is never separate from technicity: increasingly his later writings invite comparison to programming code, instructional tables and schematisations – as in *Ghost*

²⁷ Of this schizophrenic character of semio-capitalist desire, Deleuze notes “Beckett and Artaud have said all there is to say about it.” Gilles Deleuze, “Schizophrenia and Society,” *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975–1995*, ed. D. Lapoujade, trans. A. Hodge and M. Taormina (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006) 25. See also e.g. Hito Steyerl, “Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy,” *The Wretched of the Screen* (2012).

²⁸ In effect, allegory is here an engine of *ideological regulation* (meaning-production), endlessly repeatable.

²⁹ This self-perpetuating compulsion assumes, in Beckett, the form of a “plus one”: $n+1$ ($n=0, 1, 2, \dots, \infty$); i.e. this day and/or all preceding days, *plus* tomorrow; this word and/or all preceding words, *plus* the next word – any word whatsoever, etc.

³⁰ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatical Works*, 453.

Trio, Come and Go, ...but the clouds... Their operations, even at the level of verbal articulation (whenever it occurs), remain formal. “Little is left to tell,” says R, “reading” from a book in *Ohio Impromptu* (whose very title reads as self-parody in this respect):

In a last attempt to obtain relief he moved from where they had been so long together to a single room on the far bank... Relief he had hoped would flow from its unfamiliarity. Unfamiliar room. Unfamiliar scene. Out to where nothing ever shared. Back to where nothing ever shared... Day after day... Hour after hour...³¹

Beckett’s (strictly detailed) staging of these routines of control and sublimation turns upon an idea of entropy that is also one of inflationary excess: like the event-horizon that masks a singularity, subjectivity *in language* is marked by the appearance of an accelerated *slowness* that is also a *hyperproductivity*; a movement of reduction that is in the same instant radically inflationary: a simplification that structures an indefinable complexity. This is because “subjectivity,” for Beckett, is first and foremost a trope that is *also* a schema: both linguistic algorithm *and* textual circuit, as particularisable and universal as a point on a feedback loop.

And it is this radically *ambivalent* status of “technology” in Beckett that avails writing of a critical force: as that which, in the solicitation of a certain *overdeterminacy*, subverts the order of the pre-ordained, the totalisable, the presentable. There is no “subject” that isn’t also the very *image* of a supervening alienation: the image, in other words, of the *spectacle of representation itself* arising at the limits of the *unpresentable* – which is to say, the *im-possible* – wherein this impossible object is discovered in an “aesthetic” counterpart. Subjectivity in Beckett thus holds a mirror to what we might call a universal panopticism: the constraining *all-seeing* eye (as in *Film*) that nevertheless *constantly insists* (in ratio to its own invisibility) *upon seeing more*, mirrored in the (by turns convulsive, paralytic) “subject” that exists solely in order to *produce* more. Even if that *more* is simply an accumulation of epistemological lacunae – as in *Krapp’s Last Tape* and *What Where* – which serve primarily to conceal *an excess of alienation*. The rehearsal of a paranoiac “system of production,” in other words, whose delirious authority over a “nothingness” (posited as the transcendental signified of its own inexorable devaluation), belies its radically ideological character as *surplus-minimum*. The “precariat” of its non-agents and pseudo-actors – operating within a programmatic realm of the narrowly permitted and in a constant state of crisis – reflects (in so far as it “reflects” anything) the very *condition* of its so-called self-presentation as a kind of tele-technology.

This theatre of alienation produces subjectivity to the extent that it “mirrors” a panopticism that is in fact immanent to it (just as a mode of spectation is immanent to the theatrical scene), and in doing so appears to describe the fixations of a machinic desire that already constitutes it. And it is here, in the intersection of language, libido and political economy, that the *ideological* status of production (which is to say, of a certain “author function”) comes

³¹ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatical Works*, 445-6.

most clearly into view, as a pre-eminently *technological* function, *producing itself*, as Foucault says, with “the anonymity of a murmur”³² whose principal characteristic is that it *goes on*.

Future-obsolescence

Like Beckett’s algorithmic theatre, it has been observed that *Finnegans Wake* is a kind of machine: a word-machine, an analytic engine, a critical apparatus, capable – like Turing’s universal computer – of pre-comprehending, as if *in advance*, virtually everything that can be said about it. This idea has exercised a strange fascination over the cybernetic imaginary – from McLuhan’s *Gutenberg Galaxy* (originally conceived under the title *The Road to Finnegans Wake*) to Murray Gell-Mann’s naming of the fundamental constituent of the nucleon after a line in Book II: “Three quarks for Muster Mark!” (383.01)³³ – opening a purview onto what, in 1995, Donald Theall went so far as to call the “Joyce Era of technology, culture and communication.”³⁴ Perceiving in the *Wake* a logic that extends the “revolution of the word” into a revolution of the world, Félix Guattari likewise derived from Joyce the term “chaosophy” – a synthesis of cybernetics and schizoanalysis, evoking a generalised *artificial intelligence* of distributed subjectivities, extending Gramsci’s idea of the “molecular revolution” across a system of machinic subjectivities. Such a revolutionary world-machine must nevertheless wield an uncanny power. Indeed, the *Wake* itself frequently alludes to itself as a type of portentous doomsday device – one that generates discourse in order to totalise the field of discourse itself: “That’s the point of eschatology our book of kills reaches for now in soandso many counterpoint words” (482.32). And here lies the apparent contradiction of the Wakean “chaosmos”: that its irreducibility coincides with its universality.

Finnegans Wake describes itself as “mythametical” (286.23), a “vicociclotometer” (614.27), propelled by a “harmonic condenser enginium” (310.01) whose permutations of the universal “adomic structure” (615.06) expend the probability of any outcome not already subjected to its calculus. Its operation might be described as programming, by an interminable self-inscription – “as highly charged with electrons as hophazards can effective it” (615.07-08) – a generalised *future-obsolescence*. This End of History – mythic in scale – would presuppose nothing short of the subsumption of *historia* itself into a Wakean recursive or re-causal “altereffect” (483.01). By a quasi-Viconian re-evolving, an inflated dialogical present would invade the dimension of the historical in the mythic guise of its own transcendence: an event that can only ever occur in prototype or, so to speak, precessionally:

a split in their infinitive from to have to have been to will be. As they warred in their big innings ease now we never shall know.³⁵

³² Foucault, “What is an Author?” 221.

³³ See Murray Gell-Mann, *The Quark and the Jaguar* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 1994) 180.

³⁴ Donald F. Theall, *Beyond the Word: Reconstructing Sense in the Joyce Era of Technology, Culture and Communication* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1995).

³⁵ Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 271.21-24.

To speak of an “end” would thus be to speak of an effect inscribed already in its own beginning: a discontinuity at the origin subsumed into the form of a blueprint, programme, or matrix: a semantic DNA, perhaps, whose autonomy has come to represent the dominant form of a *world order*. This Wakean “polyhedron of scripture” (107.08) appears to exist *as if to demonstrate* nothing else than this paradoxical drive to discontinuity and totality. And yet *it exists* – an existence posited as both the kernel and exteriorisation of History – while nevertheless signifying the very impossibility of a “beyond.” Moreover, it repeatedly advertises this contradiction through the interminability of its processes.

Occupying something akin to an event-horizon between the “End of the Book,” as Derrida says, and the “beginning of writing,”³⁶ Joyce’s text conjures a “cosmic” totality – “In the name of Annah the Allmaziful, the Everliving, the Bringer of Plurabilities” (104.01-02) – that is, *at the same time*, nothing if not provisional – an “untitled mamafesta memorialising the Mosthighest” which “has gone by many names at disjointed times” (104.04-05) – yet its dominant characteristic is that it is *provisional at every point*. If we read the *Wake* as a kind of doppelgänger of the system of modernity – describing, in effect, a feedback of self-presentation in the interminable form of a *to come* that saturates the *now* – we do so not simply as a *reflection* of a totalising movement (its self-inscription as “chaosmos of Alle”), but as *operative*; not simply *miming* but *producing* “nichthemericallly,” as Joyce tells us, “by its corrosive sublimation one continuous present tense integumented slowly unfolded in all marryvoising moodmoulded cyclewheeling history.”³⁷

In *Of Grammatology* Derrida charts the movement of a crisis in the logic of representation that, today, we are able to recognise as the constituent form of the Anthropocene. As both the demystification of a belated Humanism (in which industrial capitalism had long disguised itself) and the reification of its processes, the Anthropocene stands in a paradoxical relation to a certain *self-evidence* – exemplified in those ideologies of *mimēsis* that Derrida shows to be the true constituents of the term “language” – which has “dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch, and has even produced the idea of the world;”³⁸ an idea that, in the course of modernity, has come to be “overwhelmed” and “effaced” in what is called *writing*.

By a hardly perceptible necessity, it seems as though the concept of writing – no longer indicating a particular, derivative, auxiliary form of language in general... no longer designating the exterior surface, the insubstantial double of a major signifier, *the signifier of the signifier* – is beginning to go beyond the extension of language. In all senses of the word, writing thus *comprehends* language.³⁹

³⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1976), 6ff.

³⁷ Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 185.29, 186.02.

³⁸ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 8.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

In Derrida's critique, language – corresponding to a Platonic ideal of “living speech” – enters into crisis with the invention of the *technē* of writing: of an autonomous form of signifying-exchange, presaging that of *currency* and of the *commodity*, the reification of surplus-value, alienation and abstraction-in-general. That is to say, “as the universal category of society as a whole.”⁴⁰ What is of central importance here, as Lukács tells us, is that a certain *agency* – a certain provisional *consciousness* – “becomes something objective and independent... by virtue of an *autonomy alien to man*.”⁴¹ Joyce calls this the “poeta:”

The prouts who will invent a writing there ultimately is the poeta, still more learned, who discovered the raiding there originally. That's the point of eschatology our book of kills reaches for now in soandso many counterpoint words. What can't be coded can be decoded if an ear aye seize what no eye ere grieved for. Now, the doctrine obtains, we have occasioning cause causing effects and affects occasionally recausing altereffects.⁴²

This movement of *autopoiesis* can in turn be regarded as “producing” an *excess* of signifying agency: from the world as semiosphere to the critical mass of its termination in the real – the *eschatology* of the “Ends of Man” transfigured into world-meaning. Just as we might speak of a techno-anthropological shift in the geological register, so too the dimension of the “real” that re/turns in writing – as the *proof of the poeta*, so to speak, and in the erasure of a certain metaphysics – presages a crisis in the idea of the world: one whose transcendence henceforth designates *the impossible*.

Once again we're dealing with an eschatology – Joyce's “eternal chimerahunter” (107.14) – in which the disappearance of the so-called *subject of history* is both reified and anticipated in an apocalyptic re/turn of the “real.”⁴³ Yet we must be wary, here, of any appeal to a tragic view of the so-called posthuman that would absolve the historical subject of what appears uniquely “machinic”: that permits, in other words, the *anthropos* to be entroped, erased in its “disappearance.” It is important to bear in mind Lacan's warning that – like the author of the Cyclops' blindness – “the subject is no-one”; that it is, from its origin, “decomposed, in pieces”⁴⁴ as that which emerges, *entropically*, from “the gap of the unconscious.”⁴⁵ What, then, does it mean to *write* (transitively? intransitively?) in the consciousness of humanism's self-

⁴⁰ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), 86.

⁴¹ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 87 – emphasis added.

⁴² Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 482.31-483.01.

⁴³ Cf. Jacques Lacan, “A Materialist Definition of the Phenomenon of Consciousness,” *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955*, trans. S. Tomaselli (London: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 51.

⁴⁴ Jacques Lacan, “Homeostasis and Insistence,” *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955*, trans. S. Tomaselli (London: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 54.

⁴⁵ Jacques Lacan, “Of the Subject of Certainty,” *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth Press, 1977) 54.

erasure? That is to say, in the wake of this Joycean “hypermnesiac machine”⁴⁶ that appears to exhaust all future possibility by reifying and pre-comprehending everything, including the very possibility of a subject? Where all that was once supposedly human returns in the traumatic “self-evidence” of the real, as the absolute horizon of (non)being?

Voidheads

For the catalogue of the *Cybernetic Serendipity* exhibition at London’s ICA in 1968 – one of the first international exhibitions devoted to the nascent field of “computer art” – John Cage wrote:

What we need is a computer that isn’t labour-saving but which increases the work for us to do – that puns (this is McLuhan’s idea as well as Joyce’s) revealing bridges (this is Brown’s idea) where we thought there weren’t any – turns us (my idea) not “on” but into artists.⁴⁷

What kind of *work* produces *artists* in place of an industrial consciousness (“turned on” by salvation *from* labour) – if by “artist” we mean an agency that stands at odds with the cold and pragmatic implementation of the control apparatuses whose “predominant mode,” as the Invisible Committee remind, is the “management of crisis”?⁴⁸ An agency that is irreducible beyond its alienation-effect – to a palliative realism, for example, in which the myth of history struggles on to its manifest destiny in the image of a humanoid “fundamental fantasy”? That *puns* – and thereby calls forth a techno-poetics inimical to rationalisation? In other words, the polysemy of a writing *born of resistance*?

The apparent contradiction on which Cage’s Joycean “computer” is built – between the automation of cognitive production in the Fordist mode (the machine assumes the burden of *thought and action*, proclaiming an emancipation from onerous labour) and a systematic demand for an *increase* in intellectual effort (in which art is identified with the very contrary of convenience) – is not one that Cage seeks to resolve but rather to exacerbate. We might say that the product of such an exacerbation is what Derrida later calls Joyce’s “1000th generation computer,” *Finnegans Wake*.⁴⁹ And it is as if, by means of a generalised *resistance*, this 1000th generation computer programmes itself to evolve into a fully autonomous system of “artificial intelligence.”

So the question becomes – not What does it *mean* to write? but *What writes*? What is this entropology of the Joycean *poeta* that on the one hand resists technē, while at the same time *superseding* it? In the vertigo of this movement there is indeed “a certain pleasure in calculating the risks”⁵⁰ – a certain *jouissance* of the acceleration towards a catastrophe, in which

⁴⁶ Derrida, “Two Words for Joyce,” 147-148.

⁴⁷ John Cage, *A Year from Monday: Lectures and Writings* (London: Calder, 1968) 50.

⁴⁸ Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrections* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009) 10.

⁴⁹ Derrida, “Two Words for Joyce,” 147-148.

⁵⁰ Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrections*, 9.

the *possible* is both foreclosed and made to appear to open out indefinitely – and in which the path of greatest resistance inscribes itself on the face of the Void.

At the beginning of the “History Lessons” episode of the *Wake*, Fordist eschatology is construed the portmanteau “teetootomtotalitarian” (260.02) – evoking Huxley’s T-totem⁵¹ and the “total” process of the Model-T integrated-assembly line (the apotheosis, as McLuhan observed, of the Gutenberg printing press). What begins as the divine word is transubstantiated into the machine-made-commodity bereft of any transcendental signified. So, too, the materiality of the Wakean cosmos is nothing but text, vectors of *information flows*. There is no end-in-sight *beyond the text*: it is, as Beckett might well have said, that End itself.⁵²

Between the logic of the book as an eschatology or *apocalyptō* of “revelation,” and writing as technē – which is to say, *as history* – a recursive, machinic conception of an art that *thinks*, and thereby construes a general consciousness, permeates the *Wake*. As counter-eschatology, it describes an acceleration by cosmic *détournement*:

Anyhow, somehow and somewhere, before the bookflood or after her ebb... wrote it all, wrote it all down, and there you are, full stop... But one who deeper thinks will always bear in the baccbuccus of his mind that this downright there you are and there it is only all of his eye. Why? Because Soferim Bebel... every person, place and thing in the chaosmos of Alle anyway connected... was moving and changing every part of the time: the travelling inkhorn..., the hare and turtle pen and paper, the continually more or less intermisunderstanding minds of the anticollaborators, the as time went on as it will variously inflected, differently pronounced, otherwise spelled, changeably meaning vocable scriptsigns... riot of inkblots and blurs and bars and balls and hoops and wriggles and juxtaposed jottings linked by spurts of speed.⁵³

In this sense, the *Wake* is a time-machine producing modernity by radical anachronism. Where the logic of the book begets history, writing begets a temporality ambivalent to historical subjectivity. “Who in hallhagal wrote the durn thing anyhow?” (107.36-108.01) the *Wake* demands. If Cage seeks to distinguish a mode of art (and of *artificial intelligence*) as *agency of thought*, by an appeal to acts of resistance, the *Wake* itself situates that point of resistance outside any *end in itself*. What we might call its deconstructive labour of “AMBIVIOLENCE”⁵⁴ evokes nothing less than a writing of the impossible, or rather, writing as the impossible.

Behind the appearance of self-evidence is the sheer vertigo of a calculus of indeterminacy. In his 1968 essay, “La différance,” Derrida likens the ambivalence of the signifier to quantum-like phenomena that do not resolve into Cartesian knowability. In the wake of the text’s “disappearance” – a double erasure that, like ALP’s missing letter in *Finnegans Wake* & the cycles

⁵¹ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932).

⁵² Samuel Beckett, “Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce,” *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (New York: New Directions Press, 1962), 14.

⁵³ Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 118.11-30.

⁵⁴ See Stephen Heath, “Ambiviolences: Notes for reading Joyce,” trans. Isabelle Mahieu, *Post-structuralist Joyce: Essays from the French*, eds. Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 46.

of muteness in Beckett's late algorithmic theatre, nevertheless leaves traces (not of itself, but as the holograph of its own non-presence, the erasure of its erasure) – no armature of the “real” is there to expose itself like some agent of epistemic (or even epistolic) revelation. As with the Freudian return of the repressed, what re/turns is a t(r)opos of erasure and substitution, a “return-of-the-return.” And if *epistemological erasure* itself designates the condition of a “re/turn of the real.” And, however “insufficient” this dialectical “equivalence” appears, its reduction isn't a measure of the failure of “meaning,” but of a *mimēsis* as *erasure at the origin* (Derrida): its “singularity” is always a factor of the unrepresentable.

In place of Sartre's pebble on the beach – an inert, base materiality – this repetition compulsion announces itself by way of a radically deformed signspace. An event-horizon in which time is simultaneously compressed and distended. A seemingly paradoxical structure of differences-without-terms: a “Nichtian glossery which purveys aprioric roots for aposteriorous tongues this is nat language at any sinse of the world” (83.10-12). What we find in the *Wake* is precisely this conception of an anutopoetic “re/turn” in the resistance of writing. Towards the end of Book I, for example, Shem is depicted as producing:

nichthemerically from his unheavenly body... till by its corrosive sublimation one continuous present tense integumented slowly unfolded in all marryvoising moodmoulded cyclewheeling history.⁵⁵

In this way, according to Lyotard, “Joyce allows the unrepresentable to become perceptible in his writing itself, in the signifier.”⁵⁶ Yet this preoccupation with the signifier distracts from what is at stake here, and which Cage intuits in the resistance of polysemy and the labour of a certain ambivalence in which the algorithm of automated sign-substitution is no longer available as the constituent mode of subjectivity, historical or otherwise. That is to say, the dimension of the real “in” the symbolic, which is precisely that of its *operations*.

To this end, the “re/turn of the real” marks that singularity in which the End of History fails to coincide with itself. Which in turn marks the failure of an idea of the world to coincide with *itself*. As Žižek has said, “humanity became aware of its self-limitation as a species precisely when it became so strong that it influenced the balance of all life on Earth. It was able to dream of being a Subject only until its influence on nature (Earth) was no longer marginal, i.e. only against the backdrop of a stable nature.”⁵⁷ That is to say, a homeostatic nature – nature “in balance” – the husbanded, supplemental “nature” of Rousseau which is, has always been, at its core, “ideological” *because* techno-poetic. The question of nature has never been separate from that of power: What hegemony *ex(er)cises itself* in the construction of nature? In the organic conception of the text? In the evocation of a *body of writing*, for example? The topology of its relation to its “object” (intractable nature) is at the same time *tropological* (there is no

⁵⁵ Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 185.29; 186.02.

⁵⁶ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 80-1.

⁵⁷ Slavoj Žižek, “Ecology against Mother Nature,” *Verso* (26 May 2015): www.versobooks.com/blogs/2007-ecology-against-mother-nature-slavoj-zizek-on-molecular-red/

intractable nature, only information): a circuit of production which is itself a semiosphere – a world autopoetically constituted. And insofar as the “consciousness” of this world exceeds subjectivity – this is not simply because it “manifests” on a purely technological, cybernetic scale: a global array irreducible to (and corrosive of) any Cartesian agency – but because this excess is also constitutive of the subject in the first place. A subjectivity inseparable from the “nichthemeric production” of surplus-value – of that excess of fetishised alienation on which its currency, as world-determining agency, is founded. An excess masking a void. And this void of subjectivity is the real.