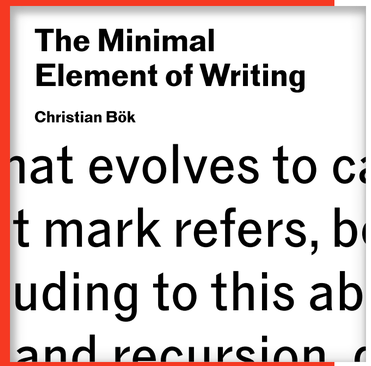
The Minimal
Element of Writing
Christian Bök
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The Minimal Element of Writing

Christian Bök

Jacques Derrida claims that the *mark* constitutes the minimal element of writing – what he calls ‘the irreducible atom’ at the asemic origin for the metaphysics of meaning itself (be this origin in the biogenetic code of life or the cybernetic code of data).[1] The writing of the mark, the *grapheme*, underpins the transmission of information, even before the advent of our phonetic language (for which the mark might seem to constitute the written glyph that evolves to capture an uttered sound). Each extant mark refers, beyond itself, to an absent mark, alluding to this absence, again and again, via iteration and recursion, doing so through a series of sequential references, none of which can terminate in a last mark. The meaning of a mark thus finds itself characterized both by a *differing* across sites of signification and by a *deferring* across times of signification.[2]

1. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 9.

2. Jacques Derrida, ‘Différance’, in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 1–28, p. 8.

Zoom out. Isidore Isou claims, however, that the *letter* itself constitutes the minimal element of writing – what he calls 'the fraction of the word'[3] from which '[e]verything must be revealed'[4] (i.e., the asemic pieces of words, pulverized into their alphabetical constituents). Isou insists that these 'particles of the Letterist' can revivify the abstract meanings of poetry by confronting the reader with the concreteness of such indivisible foundations for expression in the debris from the destruction of the word.[5] Such a fixation upon the irreducibility of the letter eventually leads Isou, late in life, to formulate an imaginary aesthetic movement called *excoördisme* – a movement, both 'extensible' and 'coordinate', aspiring to become an 'art of the infinitely large and the infinitely small' – an art whose concepts transect all scales of expression, from atoms to stars.[6]

3. Isidore Isou, 'The Evolution of the Technical Sensibility in Poetry', in *Introduction to Isidore Isou* by Sam Cooper (26 May 2019) <situationistresearch.wordpress.com/2019/05/26/introduction-to-isidore-isou/> [accessed 5 April 2024].

4. Isidore Isou, 'Manifesto of Letterist Poetry', in *Visible Language* 17:3 (1983): 70–74, 72.

5. Isidore Isou, 'The Force Fields of Letterist Painting', in *Visible Language* 17:3 (1983): 77–78, 78.

6. Isidore Isou, *Manifeste de l'Excoördisme ou Du Tëisynisme Mathématique et Artistique* (Paris: Éditions Galerie de Paris, 1992), p. 1.

Zoom out. Charles Olson claims that the *syllable* constitutes the minimal element of writing – what he calls 'the smallest particle of all', situated at 'the place of the elements', of the 'minims of language' – these 'particles of sound', each like a lone note of music.[7] Olson insists that the syllable represents, for him, the 'source of speech' – a 'minimum' that underpins the euphony of poetry; and consequently, he argues that poets must attend to the juxtaposition of syllables (rather than to the orchestration of either rhyme or metre).[8] He argues, in effect, that lines of verse must consist, at first, of syllables, each one a point of sound, and together these lines produce a 'field' of composition (possibly implying that a syllable is a zero dimension, from which the higher orders of both a one-dimensional line and a two-dimensional text might arise).

7. Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse', in *Collected Prose*, eds. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 239–49, p. 241.

8. Olson, 'Projective Verse', p. 241.

Zoom out. Ferdinand de Saussure claims that, despite his own dubiety about its atomic status, the *word* (as a value) resembles the minimal element of writing – what he calls 'the linguistic unit'[9] (i.e., 'something central in the mechanism of language').[10] Saussure suggests that, even though the 'concrete entities'[11] of language might prove difficult to delimit, what he calls the 'word-unit'[12] seems, nevertheless, to serve as the most convenient touchstone for the 'signifier' of the 'signified' in writing. The word, for him, offers itself easily as the most standard currency of exchange within language, since the word behaves much like 'a one-franc piece', insofar as every given word denotes a value with respect to the value of every other word.[13] The word, for him, thus functions as a kind of coin in a system of differences, all in reciprocal opposition to each other.

9. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), p. 103.

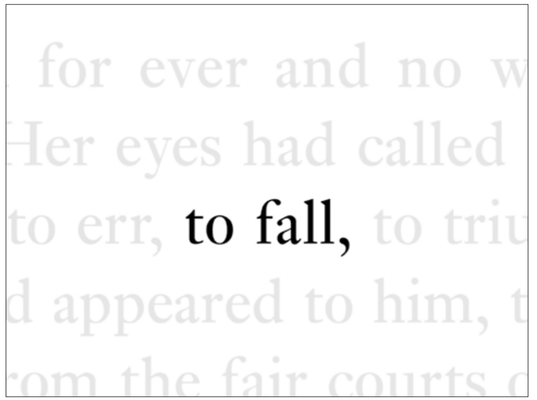
10. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 111.

11. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 102.

12. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 94.

13. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 115.

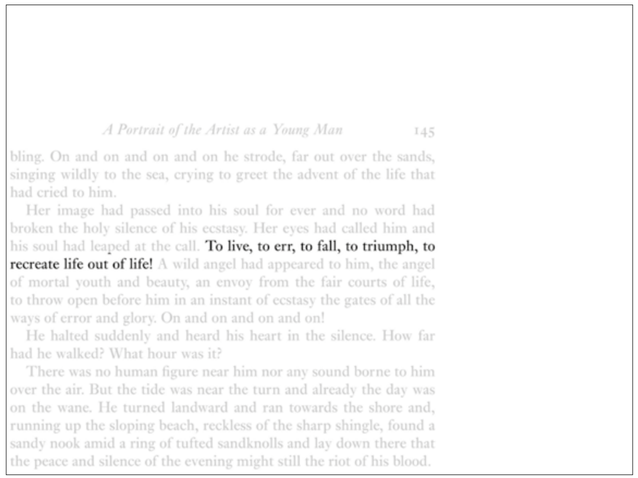
Zoom out. Jean-François Lyotard claims that the *phrase* constitutes the minimal element of writing – '[t]he only one that is indubitable [...], because it is immediately presupposed' as the most basic of links, to which a genre of both rules and goals might apply.[14] Lyotard argues that the phrase exists to enable an *addressor* to convey *meanings* about a *referent* to an *addressee* (although none of these roles in such a quadrivium can precede the phrase itself, since they emerge only within relation to each other at the moment when the phrase gets articulated).[15] Each phrase follows a set of both customs and motives – but this regimen varies from phrase to phrase such that, when linked, each phrase finds itself articulated in a series of heterogenous, if not incompatible, protocols, all in dispute with each other, unable to reach steady states of signification.



14. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. xi.

15. Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, p. 14.

Zoom out. Ron Silliman claims that, on the contrary, the *sentence* must constitute the minimal element of writing – what he calls the 'unit of any literary product' such that '[a]ny further subdivision would leave one with an unusable [...] fragment.'[16] Silliman argues that because infants, when learning language, can imitate the contours of a sentence long before they can parse it into subunits, 'the sentence is in some sense a primary unit of language.'[17] He suggests that '[*t*]*he sentence is the horizon*, the border between [...] two fundamentally distinct types of integration': one grammatical, one syllogistic – the sentence acting as a 'hinge unit' between rules of syntax and rules of reason.[18] The sentence thus provides the standard currency of exchange across orders of meaning, converting a fund of unusable fragments into the coin of tradable arguments.

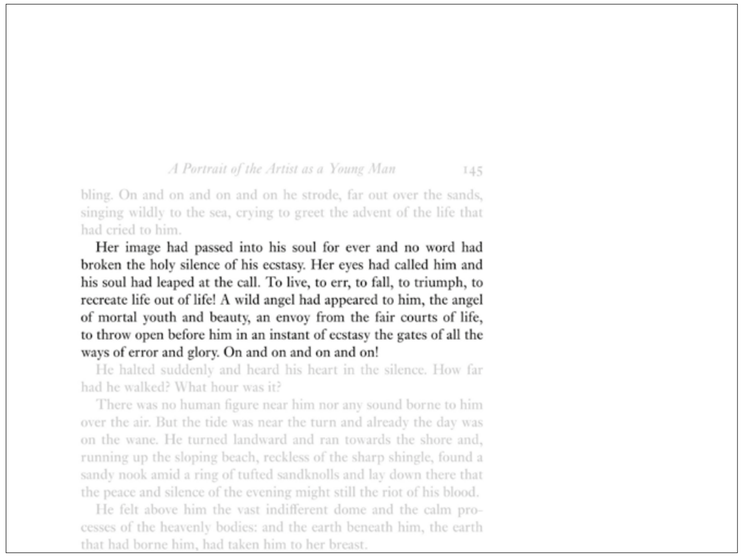


16. Ron Silliman, 'The New Sentence', in *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof Books, 1987), pp. 63–93, p. 78.

17. Silliman, 'The New Sentence', p. 65.

18. Ibid., p. 87.

Zoom out. Alexander Bain claims that the *paragraph* constitutes the minimal element of writing – what he calls a 'division of discourse': i.e., a main unit of thought, defined by its 'unity of purpose' (in a manner that recalls the rigour of the poetic stanza).[19] Bain argues that the paragraph integrates otherwise disparate sentences, all of which must unite to develop a single thesis about a topic made prominent in the first of its sentences;[20] hence, the paragraph possesses a 'unity' that does not digress from a single stated topic, but that instead elaborates upon a theme in cogent detail. I might note that because the paragraph takes on the properties of a small essay (complete with topical preface, logical comment, and summary closure), paragraphs in an essay partake of the Droste effect (like a fractal), imitating, in miniature, the whole of which they are a piece.



19. Alexander Bain, *English Composition and Rhetoric* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1890), p. 91.

20. Bain, *English Composition and Rhetoric*, p. 112.

Zoom out. John Trimbur claims that the *page* constitutes the minimal element of writing – what he calls the 'unit of discourse' (i.e.,'the fundamental feature of print culture', its structural uniformity providing a metric for the length, if not the labour, of writing itself).[21] The page of the modern moment constitutes a kind of *terra nullius*, overwritten with the features of a grid, otherwise invisible, but rule-bound by industrialized typographical norms, complete with uniform fonts in uniform lines, all arrayed in ranks on a sheet of paper, fixed in scale throughout the depth of a sheaf. The page represents a measure for the text, providing countable intervals for the routine of writing, with each turn of the page leading a person not only deeper into the dimensions of the book but also deeper into the dimensions of the self, cultivating an 'inwardness' of escape.[22]

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and turning. The water of the rivulet was dark with endless drift and mirrored the highdrifting clouds. The clouds were drifting above him silently and silently the seaweight was drifting below him; and the grey warm air was still and a new wild life was singing in his veins.

Where was his boyhood now? Where was the soul that had hung back from her destiny, to brood alone upon the shame of her wounds and in her house of squalor and subterfuge to spoon it in faded convolutions and in wreaths that withered at the touch? Or where was he?

He was alone. He was unheeded, happy and near to the wild heart of life. He was alone and young and wilful and wildhearted, alone amid a waste of wild air and brackish waters and the seabirds' cries. A girl stood before him in midstream, alone and still, gazing out to sea. She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird. Her long slender bare legs were delicate as a crane's and pure save where an emerald trail of seaweed had fastened itself as a sign upon the flesh. Her thighs, fuller and softhued as ivory, were bared almost to the hips where the white fringes of her drawers were like featherings of soft white down. Her dovelike skirts were lifted boldly about her hams and dovetailed behind her. Her bosom was as a bird's soft and slight, slight and soft as the breast of some darkplumaged dove. But her long fair hair was girlish and girlish, and touched with the wonder of mortal beauty, her face.

She was alone and still, gazing out to sea: and when she felt his presence and the worship of his eyes her eyes turned to him in quiet reflexion of his gaze, without shame or wantonness. Long, long she suffered his gaze and then quietly withdrew her eyes from his and bent them towards the stream, quietly stirring the water with her foot hither and thither. The first faint noise of gently moving water broke the silence, low and faint and whispering, faint as the bells of sleep; hither and thither, hither and thither and a faint flame trembled on her cheek.

—Heavenly God! cried Stephen's soul, in an outburst of profane joy.

He turned away from her suddenly and set off across the strand. His cheeks were aflame, his body was aglow, his limbs were trembling as across an opinion, he made a slight dismissive movement with his lips.

—I believe, continued the director, that there is some talk now among the capuchins themselves of doing away with it and following the example of the other franciscans.

—I suppose they would retain it in the cloister, said Stephen.

—O, certainly, said the director. For the cloister it is all right but for the street I really think it would be better to do away with it, don't you?

—It must be troublesome, I imagine?

—Of course it is, of course. Just imagine when I was in Belgium I used to see them out cycling in all kinds of weather with this thing up about their knees! It was really ridiculous. *Les pajues*, they call them in Belgium.

The vowel was so modified as to be indistinct.

—What do they call them?

—*Les pajues*.

—O.

Stephen smiled again in answer to the smile which he could not see on the priest's shadowed face, its image or spectre only passing rapidly across his mind as the low discreet accent fell upon his ear. He gazed calmly before him at the waning sky, glad of the cool of the

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bling. On and on and on and on he strode, far out over the sands, singing wildly to the sea, crying to greet the advent of the life that had cried to him.

Her image had passed into his soul for ever and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy. Her eyes had called him and his soul had leaped at the call. To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life! A wild angel had appeared to him, the angel of mortal youth and beauty, an envoy from the fair courts of life, to throw open before him in an instant of ecstasy the gates of all the ways of error and glory. On and on and on and on!

He halted suddenly and heard his heart in the silence. How far had he walked? What hour was it?

There was no human figure near him nor any sound borne to him over the air. But the tide was near the turn and already the day was on the wane. He turned landward and ran towards the shore and, running up the sloping beach, reckless of the sharp shingle, found a sandy nook amid a ring of tufted sandhoods and lay down there that the peace and silence of the evening might still the riot of his blood.

He felt above him the vast indifferent dome and the calm processes of the heavenly bodies: and the earth beneath him, the earth that had borne him, had taken him to her breast.

He closed his eyes in the languor of sleep. His eyelids trembled as if they felt the vast cyclic movement of the earth and her watchers, trembled as if they felt the strange light of some new world. His soul was swooning into some new world, fantastic, dim, uncertain as under sea, traversed by cloudy shapes and beings. A world, a glimmer or a flower? Glimmering and trembling, trembling and unfolding, a breaking light, an opening flower, it spread in endless succession to itself, breaking in full crimson and unfolding and fading to palest rose, leaf by leaf and wave of light by wave of light, flooding all the heavens with its soft flushes, every flush deeper than ether.

Evening had fallen when he woke and the sand and arid grasses of his bed glowed no longer. He rose slowly and, recalling the rapture of his sleep, sighed at its joy.

He climbed to the crest of the sandhill and gazed about him. Evening had fallen. A rim of the young moon cleft the pale waste of sky like the rim of a silver hoop embedded in grey sand; and the tide was flowing in fast to the land with a low whisper of her waves, islanding a few last figures in distant pools.

21. John Trimbur, et al., 'The Page as a Unit of Discourse: Notes Toward a Counterhistory of Writing Studies', in *Beyond Postprocess*, eds. Sidney I. Dobrin, J.A. Rice, and Michael Vastola (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011), pp. 94–113, p. 94.

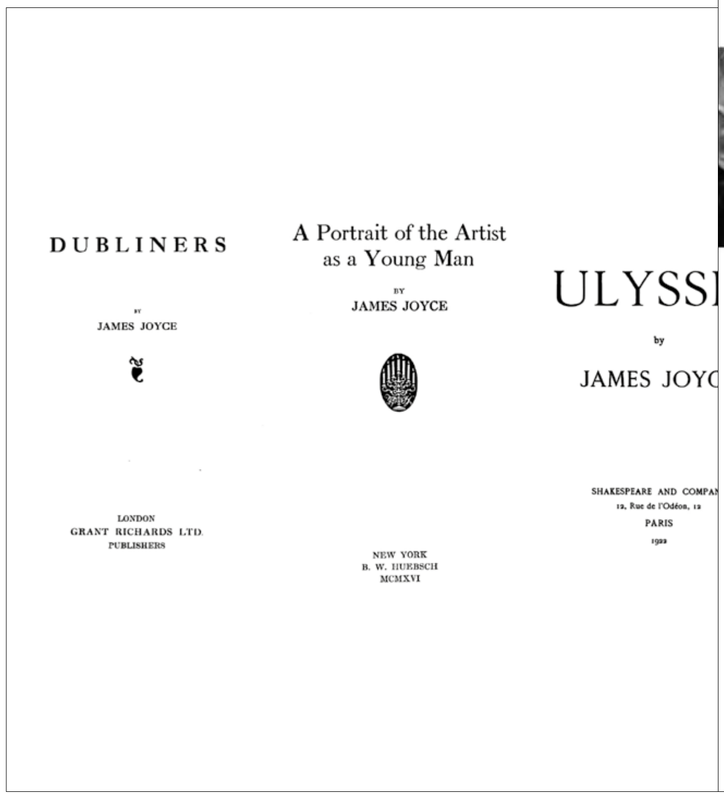
22. Trimbur, et al., 'The Page as a Unit of Discourse', p. 112.

Zoom out. Stéphane Mallarmé claims that the *book*, in fact, constitutes the minimal element of writing, 'that when all is said and done there is only one, unwittingly attempted by whoever has written' – its unity, in the end, encompassing the world, so as to become 'the orphic explanation of the Earth':[23] i.e., 'all earthly existence must ultimately be contained in a book'.[24] Mallarmé imagines that, in its singularity, such a book is a cosmos unto itself, and each poet can only ever hope to express a fragment of its entirety, aspiring, at best, to realize this 'book-to-come' through the book that the poet has at hand to make. I might note again that, in such a vision of bookish oneness, we see the spectre of the Droste effect: the book imitates, in miniature, the universe that it inhabits, making of itself a microcosm that contains a facsimile of the macrocosm.

23. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Letter to Paul Verlaine (16 Nov 1885)', in *Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé*, ed. Rosemary Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 142–48, p. 143.

24. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'The Book: A Spiritual Instrument', in *Stéphane Mallarmé: Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (New York: New Directions, 1982), pp. 80–84, p. 80.

Zoom out. Eli Mandel might claim that the *corpus* constitutes the minimal element of writing – what he calls the 'life sentence', in which the whole canon of a single writer becomes the main unit for authorial discourse: i.e., 'a life *of* words or a life *in* words.'[25] Every work written by a poet gets absorbed into such an opus, all 'to serve the sentence' (from which no poet gets out on parole). I might note that not even *parole* (à la Ferdinand de Saussure) allows us to escape *langue* altogether, for only the full stop of death ends such a sentence. The demise of the author, complete with any 'last word', leaves behind a body of work, a *corpus*, memorialized under a name, both unique and proper, identifying the standard currency of exchange among the living, who must construct for themselves the grandiose tradition of literature out of these indeed large, albeit prime, units of writing.


DUBLINERS

BY

JAMES JOYCE

LONDON
GRANT RICHARDS LTD.
PUBLISHERS

A Portrait of the Artist
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BY

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NEW YORK
B. W. HUEBSCH
MCMXVI

ULYSSI

by

JAMES JOYC

SHAKESPEARE AND COMPAN
12, Rue de l'Odéon, 12
PARIS
1922

25. Eli Mandel, *Life Sentence: Poems and Journals, 1976–1980* (Erin, Ontario: Press Porcépic, 1981), p. 7.

Zoom out. Kenneth Goldsmith claims that, on the contrary, the *archive* constitutes the minimal element of writing since, as he notes, the digital genesis of textual corpora now results at once in their curated storage. with everything copied and stowed online in automated databases: 'writers are plundering these vast warehouses of text', not for 'raw material' – 'but rather to […] reshape them'.[26] moreover, 'large-scale' venues for online social engagement (like Google, Facebook, and Instagram), archive all our interactions with their platforms, collating our utterances in a manner that might rival the repositories of surveillance in servers at the NSA. Each text that we publish in an online milieu now results in the creation of a 'library' on our behalf, whose filing system records our writing, all of it searchable by algorithms.

26. Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 188.

Zoom out. Jorge Luis Borges imagines the extreme horizon for writing – an archive for every archive: a cosmically exhaustive repository, containing every permutation of every letter (and thus, in principle, reducing all subsequent authorship to pre-emptive plagiarism). The Library of Babel exhausts the repertoire of language so utterly that 'to speak is to fall into tautologies'.[27] I might note that such a universal archive, which Borges's librarians never find a nagging concern that literature might have arisen of its own accord, not from the expressed sentiments of unique authors, but from the automated procedures of formal systems – all of it lying in wait for the right reader. Reading, then, is equivalent to the act of unshelving a book, already written, so as to sign your name to its colophon, taking possession of a work first owned by the language itself.

27. Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Library of Babel', in *Ficciones*, trans. Anthony Kerrigan and Anthony Bonner (New York: Grove Press, 1962), p. 86.