

## Louis Armand's Black Lodge Alienism

Richard Marshall

### Abstract:

This essay discusses Armand's oeuvre in the context of his alienism as "nothing literature," a writing with/of absences, and connected to many a mystical lore of the past. Marshall paints a convincing picture of Armand as a continuer of the subversive tradition in which it is absence rather than presence that generates meaning and engenders particular effects (and affects) in Armand's writing. Marshall posits that the Armand corpus is one in which all the parts resist being a whole, complexity falls apart, and there are no abstracts.

**Keywords:** Louis Armand; alienism; mysticism; subversion; literature.

*An Alienist is a person who fights economic cultural totalitarianism with unconventional weapons, using unconventional methods. The Alienist must be a good tactician, to compensate for the fact that the forces ranged in defence of economic cultural totalitarianism are vastly asymmetrical in nature. The Alienist's weapons may appear inferior to the enemy's, but from the semantic point of view the Alienist has an undeniable superiority (Ministry, 22).*

Armand's Alienism is a discovered absence traced by the philosopher of nothing Roy Sorensen. In zoos animals pace up and down, up and down. They respond to the absence of things happening. Bill Burroughs said he writes to make something happen. Writing in this situation is a shadow of the absence of events. If you take shadow-writing as action then you have a species of ghost-writing. Armand's Alienist project works to pressure this phrase. Thanks to his shadows we can separate our dreams, our bodies, even death. He works with the denial of propositions and rises above all animals who can reject things but never deny them.

The largest emptiness is a universe. His writing is in it. The shadows are in it. Therefore there is something rather than nothing. It is a good start. One thing follows from the other. This word follows that. This idea follows that. But the first particular word or idea has no explanation. Presence requires an explanation but the empty universe does not. It seems simpler. The more that can be said, the more that can be thought, the more we can be misled, confused, taken down a wrong track. Infinite things can be said with a small combinatorial repertoire of symbols. The first alphabet was Egyptian. Thoth was the scribe of their gods and those gods believed what was written. Prayers, spells, potions and magic words were stored in tombs. Hermes Trismegistus took these from the tombs and exposed them to the light of day. The secrets of the tombs were laid bare. He wanted the occult secrets out of their secret lairs, wrested from the hands of dark Pharaohs and their gods. His *Hermetica* survives.

Hermes Trismegistus is the wishful thinking of those working the semantic terrain. He never existed. He is a made-up philosopher despite the interest paid to him in late mediaeval Europe, the Renaissance and our own New Age tribes. His absence is a monkey wrench in the usual causal chain of reference. Armand has created a giant monkey-wrench, like Simon Dacia, the author of the *Corpus Philosophorum Danicorum Medii Aevi III*. When bibliophile Amplonius

did not know the name of an author he came up with dummy names. Simon of Dacia is such a dummy name. He is an absence because he never existed. Citation is a mark of merit. Dummy names can confer merit if cited just because citation is a mark of merit. Armand continues this subversive tradition.

Philosophy was absent in ancient Egypt because absence of evidence of it is evidence of its absence. There was wisdom literature but no philosophy. Oblivion terrified them. Camus thought the only serious philosophical question was suicide. Suicide is about going to oblivion. Except that oblivion is not like Prague, where Armand often is. Oblivion is not anywhere. It is literally nowhere. Before birth I was not some entity that did not exist that changed into an entity that did. Suicide asks you to leave the place of comparisons behind. You cannot think suicide in terms of being elsewhere, or as being less. To ask a prudential question presupposes existence and therefore cannot be applied to suicide. Existentialists got this right. To commit suicide *because* my life is shit does not follow. Non-existence cannot follow from a presupposition of existence, no matter how bad. Hamlet does not consider suicide but rather throws up the truth that non-existence is beyond the reach of prudential calculation. Nothingness is like that. And so it follows that “the effective subversion of enemy forces can be accomplished by a single Alienist, patient, alone & unknown, operating in absolute secrecy & in cold blood” (Ministry, 22).

In the fifth century Chinese, Indians, Persians and Greeks turned to absence. Armand therefore crosses the rivers he crosses from way back then, the fifth century BCE. Sages in China were shadows writing shadows. Taoists presume that inaction is best. Best to float than strive. Absent yourself from action and drift. Nature starts as a void for these floaters. Chess boards are empty. ‘Go’ boards too. To harmonise with nature is to become like this, a state of nature that is emptiness and the void. Imperfect stillness is reaction. Action is self-defeating because it creates new needs and eventually exhausts you. If you win, cease. Keep yin and yang in harmony. Light with dark, heaven with earth, high with low, creative with receptive, male with female, large with small, hard with soft, sunny with shady, each with curved tipping points where one yields to the other, and back again. It is the lewdness of absence that Armand first floats, as in Hamlet’s “Nothing” to Ophelia’s question regarding “a fair thought to lie between maids’ legs” (*Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 2, Line 119). As the Alienist insists: “The tactics of the Alienist must always be offensive in nature: defensive action means death. Perpetual analysis of situations merely forestalls action & offers the greatest means of preparedness to the enemy. Similarly, open battle & decisive combat, can only be to the enemy’s advantage” (Ministry, 22).

Lao-tzu writers praise non-action. Everything happens naturally. Therefore there are things to be done but what is presupposed is a hierarchy of perspectives. You have to find yourself on the ladder and do no more no less to conform to that role. There is an absence of morality. No bosses. No interference. Bad stuff will burn out. It is a peaceful anarchy but Armand knows order can be a consequence of crowding and that can lead to horrors. Space is when things settle. Less order can be a solution. His writing and his publications are attempts at breaking stride. Instead of going with the flow he finds a disrupting beat, an awkward genre, a more spaced out route. That is his Taoist bit. Lao-tzu did not exist of course.

Even a figure without eyes can seem to be looking. He writes what is not there. He is a kenophiliac. He writes absences. This confuses those who have a firm grip on the fashions. They know what is happening. They know what is there. They look at Armand and wonder at the absences and can only see a mistake. But Armand deliberately finds the empty spaces. He

blurs the line between nature and supernature in writings that efface the distinction between somethings and non-things. What are his books and what is culture? Absence conjures magical thinking and feelings of awe. An abyss is an absence that seems to draw you down. Absences can be effects. But also a puzzle because we think an effect is the relation between two things. Is Armand Confucian? If Confucius is an invention of seventh century Jesuits then he is an absence with effects.

Is Armand a Buddhist writer? Buddha embraced nothingness. Illusions are part of the Buddhist repertoire. They understand how perception and cognition are isolated from each other and therefore some illusions can be stubborn even when in the know. Buddha existed if by that we mean Siddhartha Gautama. Louis Armand exists if we mean some guy in Prague rather than a generic noun. But if Siddhartha was born in 556 BC then he could not have been a prince. His royal status is a tall tale. A dummy status. It becomes an absence. All the better for Armand's newfound absent Buddhism. The ancient Vedic had no beginning and no end. The universe is one of dreams that phase in and out under rapid eye movements of its deities. There is no founding entity. Rituals of these dream states are about sounds rather than meanings. A missing sound leads to miscomputation. The Vedas require nothing more nor less than acoustic fidelity. Truth is irrelevant. Armand trends towards polyvocalism, then monovocalism. There is agnosticism and there is belief. Sometimes nothing at all like that.

*The Alienist's most effective weapon is the re-appropriation of those fundamental elements of totalitarian discourse over which it itself is secretly unable to exercise control. This exploitation of radical ambivalence exposes the principle weakness of any totalitarian system of meaning or of unmeaning, & has the capacity to reduce the enemy's attempts at counterinsurgency to self-parody* (Ministry, 22).

Does the Armand corpus mean anything? Or is there a hollowness to it? Is it too austere? Or not austere enough? Is all none? Hence the Buddhist inflection, where all the parts resist being a whole. And impermanent. Complexity falls apart. The parts of the corpus do not exist so cannot perish. There are no abstracts. Everything exists in space and time to the Buddha. Is Armand then likewise a nominalist? All of mathematics since Cantor has been premised on the existence of the empty set. It is a precedent for the empty individual. The null set is a subset of every set. The null individual is a part of every whole. Siddhartha would refuse the null set because a nominalist. He would also refuse the null individual. Parts never combine. No whole is greater than its parts because all parts are improper. Complexes are fictions, mere useful illusions. Armand's corpus can strike us as such but this is an illusion from a nominalist point of view. Indivisible things are all there is. If the world consists of all its atoms the Buddhist denies that there is a world. There are just atoms in a certain arrangement. Is Armand best seen as this? He writes parts that remain parts that may usefully be seen as wholes sometimes. It is an illusion that maybe requires that there be someone who will succumb to it.

Grammar is greedy for illusions. If it is Thursday, what is the 'it'? So too with the need to find the subject who will succumb to the illusions. The Buddhist contends that you may look as hard as you like but never find the 'I'. David Hume spoke to travelers from the East and seemed to have learned this too. Siddhartha thinks there are mental and physical things and they are independent. Armand writes. But if non-existence is better than existence, why bother? Perhaps he works towards the extinction of writing? Buddhists do not sanction suicide unless you have lived a sequence of perfect lives. Only then can you really die. Is Armand writing each time to write a better script? When will he have perfection done?

The impersonality of the corpus is Buddhist. It denies both the individual author and the reader. Neither exist. All there is is a free-floating text. It is either perfect or not. This indifference offends some who want an allegiance and an author. Armand is caught tailoring reader expectations and conforming to their expectations. He stays alert to the impact on readers. Siddhartha adjusted according to his audiences. Language resists this and is biased towards existence rather than absence. It picks out what there is not what is absent. Perhaps Armand needs to rely on misreadings and misquotations and misunderstandings treated charitably. Linguistic illusions can be cognitively impenetrable. To accommodate this Armand is not overly intellectual. English is not safe to reason in. You can easily mistake quantifiers for nouns and so forth. English derived from Sanskrit, a safer reasoning language. Aristotle apparently imported his logic from India. Then forgot.

*The work of counter-expropriation extends into all aspects of daily life & affords the Alienist almost unlimited scope for subversive activities. But these activities need to be accompanied by theoretical discipline in order for the Alienist to fatally damage, rather than to strengthen, the system of economic cultural totalitarianism (Ministry, 22).*

Lao-tzu eviscerates action. Siddhartha eviscerates agency. Nagarjuna eviscerates whatever we act on. Siddhartha's stance denies the existence of any Armand corpus. There are just words. But still, there are the words written and the words read. The physical and the mental. If raw data is all mental then perhaps we should opt for Idealism unless materiality explains what ideas cannot. But then we would be in a world of hypotheticals. If there is an Armand writing this book, then we will have this particular reading experience. But what grounds the truth of this? Nagarjuna denies the need for grounding. So Armand may take the Nagarjuna route and agree that it is turtles all the way down. In this he sounds po-mo. Nothing grounds everything. And all that is left are conventional things which are things made out of more foundational things forever. There is no bottom to this. Is everything just a play with conventions then? And if so, whose?

*The basic question in the technical preparedness of the Alienist is, nevertheless, to know how to manipulate & counteract—to damage, make useless & destroy—the language of power in its broadest scope (Ministry, 22).*

Is Armand actually doing nothing more than raising possibilities? If so then he is not asserting anything. But he is setting us up to think about what might be the case, and filling in some implications. If there is no end to divisibility then attempts to explain things from the bottom up are in trouble because they cannot get started. A Buddhist who denies wholes has trouble with this. On the other hand for the anti-Buddhist who asserts wholes as prior to parts this is good news. Reality has a top down trajectory.

What if reality is topless so that not all combinations of things compose other things. There must be an infinite number of things able to combine in infinite ways. Is this Armand's way? He once wrote a maximal book of Prague whose whole may be nothing because not composed of anything else. For all we know, everything in that book might be a dependent being, including the book and including everything not in the book. Everything could have no grounding. This is something that happens when reading Armand. Something feels like it is missing but it is just a mistaken inclination to refuse the empty ground.

*The severe limitation placed upon non-economic non-cultural conformity means that the Alienist must be constantly imaginative & creative. Alienists must possess initiative, mobility & decisiveness, as well as versatility in the creation of advantageous situations. The Alienist's duty is to act, to analyse & plan or improvise solutions to each problem that presents itself to effective dissent (Ministry, 22).*

There is something Chinese and Indian, therefore, in Armand's Prague, but there is also something Greek. He wonders if the absolute nothingness of nothingness, the inaction and the absence of agents is unintelligible. So perhaps it is better to choose between the different species of absence and opt therefore for a relative absence. If we do not perhaps we wonder whether everything in Armand is meaningless. Every nothing to Lao-tzu, Siddhartha and Nagarjuna is relativised to a question outside a void. The Greeks relativised to the void even as they feared the void, as do ants.

The aversion to nothingness is a trope of Western philosophy. The writer of fictions tries to reverse this prejudice. Parmenides is the great absolute denier. Nothing comes in and nothing goes out. There is just one thing. To have two would mean that one was not the other. But talk of "not being" makes no sense. There is one thing and contrast effects, like shadows, holes, cracks and ghosts. These absences are parasitical on existence. Armand's texts write towards such phantoms. They walk with their feet up against ours, like shadows that cannot exist without existents. They invert. His tombed figures have reversed limbs, like characters in David Lynch's *Black Lodge*. Reversed lives. His Australia is written backwards like a concave spoon. One thing that seems to linger is the darkness and the unnatural alacrity. Like spirits his books are attracted to things that have their shape. They are the darkness as spiritual nonbeing, a double realm haunting the positive, the actual, the existents. Everything is enclosed in the duality of being and non-being. Change is not coming out of nothing nor going into nothing.

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The fundamental layer is one thing that goes neither in nor out. The mental realm is the same, and is a ratio of light to absence. The dead just think less vividly than the living. Absences cannot exist. But we see absences. We cannot see what does not exist. It is a contradiction that suggests we do not have the whole truth yet. Armand is writing at a time when so many think they do have the whole thing. So Armand is writing out warnings against them. If things cannot go in and out of existence then what of time whereby we have the past going out to the present which in turn goes out to the future. These must be unreal transitions and so time is unreal. There is just one thing. So Armand is weighing it up. If it is all empty it cannot be seen because you cannot see nothing.

Is all in all in Armand? Is all an endless hierarchy, a mixture of mixtures? Is everything adulterated? The changes in his works—plot lines, characters, general structures and items—are like golden spirals that change and stay the same, like Bernoulli's logarithmic spirals.

Everything seems like it has no bottom layer. In this way the changes occur as a shift in aggregate. Nothing gets destroyed but the mixture makes something without destroying anything in the process. Are these works then like mementos that help balance the present with the absent? Sure, his books are often more like rumours picked up on travels. And being so they become more like the void.

Does his Alienist literature sprinkle being and nonbeing equally like atoms and the void? Voids are parasitical on being but have causal properties. Voids can make something happen. A sponge can lift water from gravel because it sorts liquids from solids. Sponges are defined by the holes they contain. Holes are voids. Armand's literature works like parasitical non-being. Insulation is a hole that prevents heat passing out from the room. Newton's is a physics of the void. Gravity is action across voids. It cannot be grasped by common sense. Science has long since given up on trying to understand its theories. What is the mood of literature as Armand surveys it? It varies from being nothing to everything, so he comes off sometimes as a manic depressive, other times an ecstatic. Most days there is a sense that he only needs the void. Just literature. Being becomes whittled down to an annoying, despairing and annihilating zero. What is going on? Just make something happen...

But there are other moods where writing seems all too gathered around non-literature and therefore the non-void. His Plenist atomism is like Plato's impossible Platonic Solids described in *Timaeus* and Kepler's *Mysterium Cosmographicum*. The five solids cannot be packed snugly like cubes. There is always a void. And in this state, he continues to write.

Does literature cause movement? Voids explain motion. And weight. Lewis shows that a vacuum is immoveable. It can resist any force. Armand's literature is that kind of void at times. It resists. It refuses to budge. It will not be spun. Not even by critique's spokesmen.

*The relative folly of Žižek & Agamben's interventions exposes the extent to which the production of critical fetish objects has come to manifest the same cultural & economic forms as those it pretends to "critique." What Žižek & Agamben have not been willing to examine is—to rephrase Bourdieu—"the entire set of social mechanisms that make possible" the figure of the "public intellectual"—even, or especially, in these apparently anti-intellectual times—as the producer of that fetish called critique (Armand, 52).*

But if everything is not the text then where is the text? Does the text lie outside the boundary of everything else, a void outside the boundary of the cosmos? But why would the cosmos not float out and infiltrate the surrounding void, and become eventually so dispersed that they could no longer gather themselves up? Derrida thought there was nothing outside the text so this is a picture po-mo readers would recognise. Those who dispute the po-mo way deny the dilution of the cosmos into the void, the world into the text. They think the cosmos is still around. They propose an eternity of being. Often, the void is not seen as eternal. But if parasitical on the cosmos then the void too is eternal because it could occupy the same space as the cosmos, like shadows do.

Writers come off as stoics sometimes. They deny that their writing encircles and freezes, that their stories and plays, poems and screenplays are monsters. They think their works are harmless and do not insulate anything or anyone. They think there is no limit to the non-written world and so what they do cannot really exist. What is this? A strange holism that seems

Chinese before Indians imported atomism whereby the whole is greater than the parts. But Armand knows that shadows deceive enough to leave poor souls grasping for them and letting go of reality. Something like that.

*This pathological retreat into (grandiose) New Myths, as a proxy for the task of direct intervention, seems paradoxically geared towards the conservation of a cultural status quo (the same litany of issues, the same litany of responses), rather than a practical instrumentalising of the pandemic for the purpose of deconstructing the prevailing culture that gave rise to it (Armand, 52).*

He writes shadow theatres, as light and wide as the interior of caves. His fictions can be high fidelity. Others are more distortions. But two-dimensional shadows allow the deduction of three dimensional objects. So his work can also be understood as X-Rays of a kind. Even so, objects are agreed to be more real than their shadows. But maybe that is something to do with permanence. But the ideal of the object is more permanent than the object. And Armand knows how literature can idealise. So perhaps here is a secret wish: to restore the parasitical shadow to primacy. In the underworld of the imagination lie just images. But if it is bright enough there is an afterimage. It is there. Presented as if in space even though it is not. Shadows are the absence of light. But they are realer than afterimages. They are out there in space. Images cannot be at the apex of being. There is a dizzying higher place suggested by this. Armand remains growling towards the lower depths of shadows, reflections, illusions and literature.

He fixes his shadows to be likenesses. The Platonists call this shadowing shadows. It steps further away from being than ever. But Shakespeare is tolerant:

If we shadows have offended, / Think but this, and all is mended, / That you have  
but slumbered here / While these visions did appear. / And this weak and idle theme,  
/ No more yielding but a dream (Shakespeare, Act 5, Scene 1, Lines 365-70).

There can be a book about a book. The Platonist sees this as a lower reality than the book itself. And a book about a book about a book. And so on forever. But a shadow cannot cast a shadow. There are no shadows of shadows. The shadow is rock bottom. So there is a problem if we associate the book with literature and with Armand's art. But the metaphor is itself a shadow. A shadow is a visual aid. Armand wants to help us see rather than be aesthetic. He wants to make us see better. See what better? That we suppress shadows to focus on what is supposedly important. Thus he is playing around with illusions. The Hermann-Grid illusion is a grid of black squares on a white background. At the intersections we see grey ghost dots. They are created by the contrast between the black and the white and our perceptual apparatus. But shadows are not like this. So shadows are not illusions. There is hope yet.

Have all his potentialities been realised? Of course not. Potential is equivocal and needs relativising to the goals. Absences are the same. An empty fridge is not a void. Is Armand really working with an actual shadow? Maybe the void is just a potential. Or is it the lightness of absence? Is there a reason for everything he does? Does he do therapy? Perhaps he denies truth is in the abyss. Perhaps he wonders about the serenity of contingency, remaining fatalistic about the fact that what he does is take a crack at reality. Armand shows us the lack, the absence, the void that is writing so we see the plenum. His shadows assist us by throwing out the appearance of depth, and beauty and presence. His privations are driven by accidental privations of Indo-

European grammar. Language can be a prison with, say, a noun-verb, referent-substance lock. But Armand makes ideas not words the bearer of meanings.

His work warns us against intellectual temptations and the need to have and call out our enemies—recall his criticism of Žižek, Agamben, et al. They remind us of the stupidities of humanity. The repertoire of the Alienist propaganda works to stop us anthropomorphising humanity. Humanity is a black box whose inner principles are hidden forever. The Alienist is the metaphorical agent whose point is to jar its readers. Its function is the same as many pints of draught beer. Armand's Alienist contends this necessity of consequence: Necessarily, if the Alienist foresees you will do the right thing, then you will do the right thing and not this alternative necessity of consequence: if the Alienist foresees you will do the right thing, then necessarily you will do the right thing. The Alienist knows that we are free and have conscience even if it is mysterious and beyond the powers of our explanation. We are not machines. We can choose what we decide to do. The illusion of the machine world may be unbreakable but we can ignore it, just as we ignore other stubborn illusions such as the sun setting and the moon being larger at the horizon than when high above our heads.

Armand's Alienist literature intermingles the negative with the positive. It works like a sponge. Literature is the perforated void. Just as in art we can tolerate the visually incoherent we find we can tolerate the imaginary fictions of the Alienist manifestos and their repeated heuristics. There is hope in the Alienist nothing literature because nothing can contain everything and is everywhere. Armand is using literary techniques (broadly conceived) to audit our perversions. For Kant a joke is but a tense expectation turned to nothing. Armand is working his writings as a Kantian humour—Kant pronounced in the German way of course. Reading this material is the equivalent of Franz Kafka and Max Brod travelling to the Louvre's Salon Carré to look at the absence of the Mona Lisa in 1922. Perhaps Armand is being an expressivist about absences: as such, what he is reporting is regret with a sigh of disappointment. Are we to lament in order to change the future? Well, if we are facing the imminent end of the world I may well lament this, without directing this towards amelioration.

Apollinaire denied stealing the Mona Lisa. Picasso was implicated but denied any close association with the man who had signed a manifesto threatening to burn down the Louvre. Vincenzo Perugia stole the Mona Lisa and kept it in his apartment for two years and then took it to the Uffizi Gallery in Florence on the grounds that Napoleon had stolen it from Italy and he was returning the spoils of war. He was given a year-and-15-days prison sentence and served seven months because it was deemed an act of restoration rather than theft. But of course, Napoleon never stole the painting. It was a gift to the French King Francis I. Armand's Alienists shimmer in this region of mistaken identity and absence and point the way through our catastrophes. We are back inside Lynch's Black Lodge. Or never left it.

Bonne chance.

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