

The Names of the Nothing

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Abstract: Every discourse about the nothing seems fully and ultimately empty. However, this cannot be true precisely because it is language – that is, discourse – which always brings forth the nothing, the word of the “Nothing”. The language therefore speaks about the nothing and perhaps also “speaks nothing”. In its primary – and *abstract* – appearance, the nothing is precisely “that” “which” it is not. However, its word is still **there** in the words of most languages (for we cannot know all). What is more, since it is not, at a first sight all the nothing has is its word, its name... and this is precisely what protrudes. But the word of the nothing utters in language only that which has no **being**. That is therefore not just any kind of negation, but the negation of being, the name of the negation of being. The “nothing” is therefore **the** mere word of the negation of being. Which lives standing in languages. As deeply that its translation presents no problems. The German *das Nichts* can be translated unproblematically to the English *nothing*, the French *rien* or *néant*, the Slavic *nič*, the Romanian *nimic* or the Hungarian *semmi*, etc. However, if we go on deeper into the problem, it shows that, despite the unproblematic translation, being and (its) negation articulates in different ways in the names of the nothing. The writing analyses this in detail, with special emphasis of the Hungarian word of Nothing [Semmi]. It concludes by initiating a philosophical dialogue with a poem of Attila József.

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Every discourse about the nothing seems fully and ultimately empty. However, this cannot be true precisely because it is language – that is, discourse – which always brings forth the nothing, the word of the “Nothing”. The language therefore speaks about the nothing and perhaps also “speaks [the language of] nothing”.

It is a question, however, whether the language does indeed think about the nothing?

In its primary – and *abstract* – appearance, the nothing is precisely “that” “which” it is not. However, its word is still **there** in the words of most languages (for we cannot know all). What is more, since it is not, at a first sight all the nothing has is its word, its name... and this is precisely what protrudes.

It is in fact that word or name of the nothing which most directly stands before us and – as we also *utter* it – within us. So the word of the nothing **explicitly** is the not a contingent, but precisely a necessary subject and field of the outspoken and questioning thinking about it. Which awaits consideration.

However, to consider the words of the nothing may mean nothing else than thinking into these words. For, I repeat, the only “nothing” that is problematic – at least for now – stands in front of us only and exclusively as a mere word. We can only say – perhaps – what its significance and importance in our languages is “after” thorough consideration. So we can only understand the various directions of the meaning of the dictionary word. *Not* the other way round.

But: the name of the nothing only utters in language that which has no **being**. It is therefore not just any kind of negation, but the word or name of the negation of being. This is how Hegel could find that – as concepts – the Nothing and the Being are identical. With this, however, the nothing as a concept is exhausted and it disappears, and what remains as its precedent is only and exclusively the word of the nothing. For the work, the name precedes the concepts (and Hegel of course).

So the fact that the nothing disappears in its concept, is merely one more reason or basis to take seriously its word or words! For what **is** “here” most directly is the language which utters it, the speaker, and the nothing as a word that the speaker speaks. These are not “concepts” but – rather – experiences, which witness the togetherness of language, speaker and the nothing and – as we shall see – also articulate it. Because the “unutterable” can have nothing to do with it. For it is uttered, it is expressed.

The nothing as utterance is a mere word. As a concept, it is empty with existential tension (Hegel), for it is connected to being – as a concept – precisely by negation, precisely by the negation of being. And vice versa... This is why it cannot be avoided in the course of thinking about being, the human being, and existence, for it is not a contingency, but a law-enforced possibility which thus has a huge impact. For it may be – or perhaps it is certain – that the being constituted in questions of meaning may lose its existence in time... so this belongs to being itself and the being of the “speaker” as well.

The discourse of the “speaker” is the language or languages. It is in language that the speakers utter the words of the nothing. Therefore the words of the nothing are just as special and historical as the utterers themselves. This is how these (the words of the nothing) belong to, or rather constitute, articulate the history of being, in the language.

The “nothing” is therefore **the** mere word of the negation of being. Which lives standing in languages. As deeply that its translation presents no problems. The German *das Nichts* can be translated unproblematically to the English *nothing*, the French *rien* or *néant*, the Slavic *nič*, the Romanian *nimic* or the Hungarian *semmi*, etc. However, if we go on deeper into the problem, it shows that, despite the unproblematic translation, being and (its) negation articulates in different ways in the names of the nothing.

The German word of nothing is one block, one syllable: *das Nichts*. It was Martin Heidegger who considered this word most deeply. The word sends, of course, Heidegger to negation, for thinking in the horizon of the German utterance

of this word, starting from the nothing, one may consider first of all the negation itself (*das Nichts*) as saying NO. Guided from this, Heidegger analyzes the series of complexities of negation: negative and privative NO (*steresis*). Concluding that the Nothing not only precedes, or is more original than negation, but that negation derives from an articulately denied being – actually the Nothing, that is, a being left inarticulate in the German language. That is why Heidegger must leave the German language and turn to Greek, to Aristotle's *steresis*. The *das Nichts* negates the being in such a way that, uttering and considering it, founds and articulates the negation itself in the first place. But it leaves inarticulate the negated being itself.

So if we look at it abstractly, the Nothing means negation in all the words connected to it, in all its names and in all languages: the *negation of Being*. Thanks to this abstraction, the names of the Nothing can usually be translated into different languages without problem.

However, the negation of being characterizing any name of the Nothing is *differently* carried and *articulated* in different languages. *Negation* and *Being* are articulated differently through the structure and utterance of these words. Therefore we must try to consider some of these words to be able to “join them together”.

The Nothing is a word by which our languages express in the first place the deficiencies and insufficiencies of our existence, the uncertainty of the ground, our failures and destructions, and so on. And it is precisely this how the Nothing gets to becoming a word in our languages because it is brought to utterance by the existence of our being. Therefore, with reference to the Nothing, the aim of philosophy is not – and cannot be – to create some kind of “concept” or “idea” out of its words, but merely to penetrate and record everything by thinking which these, as words, mean in language. The “nothing” is therefore a simple word that we are *compelled* to utter at any time.

Some languages express the Nothing with *simple*, monolithic words. As we have seen, the German *das Nichts* is one of these. In other languages the word for Nothing is a compound. Such are the English “nothing”, the Romanian “nimic”, or the Hungarian “semmi”. The Latin origin “néant”, which expresses the Nothing as pure non-being, the pure negation of being, is also a compound.

We must now examine how the negation and the being articulate in the words of the Nothing in the languages accessible to us. Heidegger's German word (*das Nichts*) takes to the negation of Being primarily through the foundation of the NO, of negation. It negates Being by founding the negation itself by its origin. The negated being remains in its original indeterminacy, but this is precisely how the negation finds the being and appropriates the origin of its articulations.

In contrast, the English name of “Nothing” expresses the negation of a Being grasped and articulated in its “thing-ness”. Negation does not “work” here therefore in a completely inarticulate way, but the negated Being is articulated in the English word in its “object-like” quality.¹

¹ In his habilitation paper written on the problem of negation analyzed from the viewpoint of functional grammatics, Peter Kahrel deduces the English term “Nothing” from the concept of negation understood as a 0 (zero) quantifier fused with an “undetermined”. Therefore it must be especially emphasized as a fact indispensable to understand the word *Nothing* that this

Just as interesting is the French name of the Nothing: *rien*. Originally this word meant precisely “thing”, but in the manifestation which is not the thing’s “own”, in which the thing “cannot be found”, that is, in which it appears as negated.² Therefore the word “rien” gains its current meaning by the assimilation and association of “thing-ness” and negation, but in such a way that neither the negation nor the “thing-like” being are articulated in it, only merged together.³

The situation is completely different however when we analyze the articulations of the Romanian term “Nimic”! This is also a compound, created from “nici”, meaning “neither” and the adjective “mic”, meaning “little, small”. The negative “nici” is completely different, however, than the German “das Nichts”, and different from the completely inarticulate English “Nothing”. For the Romanian “nici” articulates the negation as a *searching negation*! On the other hand, the “mic” denotes a kind of being diminished in a quantitative respect, thus the Romanian “nimic” means precisely that no Being “can be found” “either” for the searcher (so *we cannot find it*) that could be grasped at least in its “smallness”. That is: the negation grasped in its searching nature and being and manifested as such loses its “quality” of an abstract logical operation, and linguistically records its originally

“undetermined” is in fact always a “thing”. However, in the background of this superficial understanding there is always a much deeper misunderstanding about the *sui generis* searching nature of the negation of the Nothing, and its connection to the negated Being. The negation left in the void of the inarticulate undetermined and the 0 quantifier and the articulation of the negated Being is in fact impossible to be considered. What we see here is probably just as much the limitation and trap of the English language than the deficiency of the method. Still, Kahrel analyzes forty words of forty languages in statistics and tables, among which also the Romanian and Hungarian words of the Nothing. In spite of this, the negation for him is simply a 0 quantifier! Supposedly this is why it can be “applied” in an undetermined way. The “Nothing” and the “Nobody” (the “body” articulated as human) can only be regarded just as (differently) undetermined only in the indeterminacy of the negation. That is: just as co-originary. But actually the “Nothing” is “closer” to the origin than the Nobody”! But this can only be achieved by the real understanding of the searching-questioning “No”. The “Nobody” – also in Romanian, “Nimeni” – means “not somebody”. The “Nobody” contains a sending to the searcher: where there is “Nobody”, there is only the one who searches (for them). But meanwhile the horizons of searching can be “full with things”. However, in the NOTHING we go beyond an undetermined “thing-ness”, first reaching to the WE – the searchers who do not find –, then becoming that “WE OURSELVES” who do not find precisely OUR SELVES. Where there is “Nobody”, there is only the lonely searcher. Thus the “Nobody” does not mean “neither”, but, on the contrary, it means “alone”. That is, the searcher of the “neither” will actually never find the “Nothing” in the “Nobody”, only its own Self. The “Nobody” is thus in fact the only I which derives from the “Nothing”. See Peter Kahrel, *Aspects of Negation* (Amsterdam: Akademisch Proefschrift, 1996), 30–43.

² Albert Dauzat, Jean Dubois, and Henri Mitterand, *Nouveau Dictionnaire Étymologique et Historique* (Paris, 1964).

³ Perhaps this is why French thinkers prefer to use the technical term “Néant” instead of the “rien”, which, as all technical terms, connects mere notions merely conceptually: the Being grasped in its conceptual inarticulation and the negation also grasped in its logical-conceptual inarticulation.

existential nature. Meanwhile the Romanian “Nimic”, if only in its quality of uttering a diminished quantity, articulates the being again only in its “thing-like” nature. (For ultimately only the things can be really “small”.)



Irina Dumitraș cu Măgurean, *Untitled*
10,8 cm x 8,5 cm, Polaroid, 2015

The Hungarian word for nothing, “Semmi”, also articulates negation as originally searching. However, considering its articulation, it tells perhaps even more than the ones previously analyzed. The Hungarian SEMMI is also a compound

of “sem” (here also neither) and the personal pronoun “mi” (meaning “we”). The negative “sem” expresses in fact “neither here” (“sem itt”), “nor there” (“sem ott”), “neither then” (“sem akkor”), “neither me” (“sem én”), “nor him/her” (“sem ő”), etc. That is: I/we have searched everywhere, but I/we have found nothing, nowhere, never. However much we thought about it: the NOT to which the “sem” sends is not the negating “Not”, nor the depriving “Not” that Heidegger revealed in the analysis of “das Nichts”.

The “Not” in the “sem” is – as we have seen – a *searching* Not! It says in fact that *searching, we have not found*. By this, it says that the way we met, faced and confronted the Not is actually a search. Thus the “sem” places the negation in the mode of search, and the search into the mode of Not (that is, negation).

What does all this mean in its essence? Firstly, it means that, although the SEM is indeed a kind of search which “flows into” the Not, still, as a search, it always distinguishes itself from the not-s it faces and runs into. For searching is never simply a repeated question, nor the repetition of a question, but a question *carried around*. Therefore the SEM is always about more than the tension between the question and the negative answer given to it. For the negation itself – the Not – is placed into the mode of search! And reversely.

Therefore the “sem” never negates the searching itself, only places and fixes it in its deficient modes. Those in which it “does not find” in any direction. This way the SEM *charges*, emphasizes and outlines the Not, but, it also stimulates the search until the *exhaustion of its final emptiness*. Therefore the contextually experienced Not – that is, the SEM – is actually nothing else than an endless deficiency of an emptied, exhausted, but not suspended search.

These ensure on the one hand the stability of the SEM, which is inclined to hermetically close up within itself, while on the other hand they also ensure an inner impulse for the search which, emanating from it, continues to push it to its emptiness. And it is in the horizon of this emanating impulse that the SEM merges with the pronoun MI, in the Hungarian name for NOTHING.

The MI in Hungarian is at the same time an interrogative pronoun and the 1st person plural personal pronoun. Whether or not this phonetic identity is a “coincidence”, it conceals important speculative possibilities that should not be overlooked. For the “Mi” pronoun with the “Sem” negative always says that it is WE (Mi) who questioningly search, but find NOTHING (SEMMI). Merged in their common space, the SEM and MI expresses that the questioners grasped in the plurality of their searching questions, facing the meaning of the SEMMI, only arrived at, and ran into the NOT, the negation.

In the space of its articulation the Hungarian word of the nothing offers a deeper and more articulated consideration of what it “expresses”, fixing not only the search and its – deficient – modes, but also the fact that it is always WE who search and question, even if we cannot find ourselves in “that”, in the Nothing. That is to say, the Nothing – in one of its meanings – is precisely our strangeness, foreignness and unusualness, which belongs to our own self, and therefore all our attempts to eliminate it from our existence will always be superfluous.

The Hungarian word of the Nothing also reveals that all this is not merely an external negation of Being, but such which always takes part in our being and

existence. However, in order to understand it we must consider the articulation of the various words of the Nothing.

However, it also reveals that the interrogative pronoun MI? (what?) carries other impulses as well and sends to different directions. It mobilizes through the following questions: “MI ez?” (What is this?), “MI az?” (What is that?), etc. Of course the MI? question in the name of the Nothing (Semmi) always stands in the horizon of the SEM, the searching Not. The impetus of searching therefore runs into the wall of the NO. However, one cannot disregard, despite any fate-like negativity – that the search of the searching NO and the question of MI? always mutually urge and drive each other. The MI? question in SEMMI never lets our search stop completely, no matter how negative the “findings” or “answers” may be (see SEM). It is therefore not only the negation which articulates it as a searching No, but the Being as well which carries and makes necessary this negation. The Being takes part in this negation first by surpassing its “thing-like” nature, which, however, still belongs to ourselves as the final outcome and vector of our searches.

It is actually an original form of Not, the searching Not that we found in the Romanian and Hungarian words of the Nothing: the “Nici” and “Sem” are in fact “open” nots in a way, which are therefore capable of carrying deeper and more dynamic existential meanings of negation. It is this searching Not which carries and originates both the privative and the negative Not, if in a non-considered way. In addition, its Hungarian names also resonates a special tension which is not found in any other words of the Nothing that I know of. For here – even if it is predestined to negation, in it the question of MI? is still born, sounds and resonates in this, which also originally belongs to our own selves (MI).

What more is there to hope and expect for a question which always sounds and resonates even without an answer? Naturally, it cannot hope or expect anything else “instead” of an answer than a joint which – without being entirely satisfactory – *articulately joins* them together.⁴ That what – in the word of the Nothing – cannot hope and expect for any answer as its fate, but what always is reborn and regenerated in it, cannot hope and expect for anything else – as an attachment which matches it – than a *miracle*.

Indeed, the Hungarian word of SEMMI the deaf, but irremovable attachment of the MI? question of expectation is precisely the *csoda* (miracle): “MICSODA?” and the answer which replies to it in the Semmi: SEM-MI-CSODA! That is: where “there is” Nothing (Semmi), there “is not even” “a miracle”!

Still, in the Hungarian word of Nothing, any time it is uttered, the silent question about the expectation of the miracle is voiced, even if it is not thought through, even if it runs directly into the positivity of the lack carried in the searching negation of “Sem”. That is why the expectation of the miracle is actually indestructible and irremovable, since it basically resides in the original relation of the Dasein, the being-here and the Nothing – and through this the Being. For the same reason, beyond the expectation which articulates the attachment as a “miracle”, the Hungarian word of the Nothing – directly and explicitly – also

⁴ By “joining” I mean that something is “attached” to something else but still remains always external to it.

incorporates a sending into another direction. In this direction it sends our existence back to itself.

Closing Excursus:
Nothing's branch

In the last stanza of his poem entitled *Without hope*, Attila József invents, articulates in the depths of poetry the name/word of the Nothing. The poem:

WITHOUT HOPE

Man comes at last to a vast stretch
of sandy, dull, waterlogged plain,
looks round in wonder, the poor wretch,
nods sagely and knows hope is vain.

I too am genuinely trying
to look round unconcernedly.
An axehead, a silvery sighing,
Shudders across the poplar tree.

My heart is perched on nothing's branch,
a small, dumb, shivering event:
the gentle stars jostle and bunch
and gaze on in astonishment.⁵

How should one understand this last stanza and the Nothing in it? Is this a “simple”, admirable poetic image, or something that invites to a philosophical dialogue?

The poet's heart is perched on nothing's branch, shivering. But does the nothing have a “branch”? And if so, how does this branch grow? What is the relation between the branching nothing and the pensive, shivering (poetic) heart?

Well, the deficiency of the searching (SEM), taken around and belonging to Us (MI), which by its fate brings to newer and newer questions and searches, CRACKS again and again (with and within us)... Every new question and every impulse of searching originating from the Nothing and falling back into it is a new branch of the nothing.

Therefore: without a shivering, and always questioning-searching, pensive heart, on the one hand, there “is no” nothing, and on the other hand it cannot be anything else than a questioning and searching, repeatedly cracking (widely branching) universal exposedness that cannot be exhausted (only died⁶). WE (MI), all of us. Which can only open shiveringly – always questioningly – to the gentle

⁵ Translation by George Szirtes. In Gyöngyi Végh, ed., *Inspired by Hungarian Poetry – British Poets in Conversation with Attila József* (London: Balassi Institute Hungarian Cultural Centre, 2013), 28–29.

⁶ “An axehead, a silvery sighing,/ Shudders across the poplar tree”

pure coldness of the universal stars without self-deceit and miracle. (Sem-mi/neither us ... nor some empty miracle to hope for).

The shivering heart “sits” at the essence of being and life, at the roads’ ends of the branches of searches constituted by negations and denials, sent to itself (shivering, beating), and swung back to the human and non-human universe... where it shivers sitting in – or on – the Nothing. Shivering is therefore here the question, the searching which does not “find” anything with any of its frowns.

The nothing is not an endless universe of stars, and this is not even void... but it is precisely the existence searching-questioning itself mortally which belongs to the human and non-human universe (precisely on account of its mortality!), and draws it in its irrhythmic shivering to being; in its newer and newer branches, mindfully and undeceptively, it cracks the Nothing.

Just such a being can situate itself in meaning, in the questions of meaning cleverly and judiciously, and just such a being may accept – shaking off the deceptive and easy “hopes” – the Nothing essentially related to its being, “being born” and unraveled through it.

The search for the meaning of the being, of life is a kind of loneliness, a kind of alienated, creative suffering of turning-to-the-world. In which the suicide does not mean senselessness, but the unbearable torment of a clear vision... Therefore we do not simply fall into the Nothing, but reach it on a poetic-philosophical path. One that the poet treads in a deserted, “vast stretch”, a clear and clever mind, and a shivering heart, slowly and pensively. And to which he arrives also this way.

For the entire poem is an arrival after a kind of existential **journey** – pensive, slow, devoid of any magic of initiation. Which is, however, not about reaching a destination. It is the destiny of man, of “life” that – willingly or not – takes a creative mind pensively to that spot (*Man comes at last...*) The path is about freeing oneself from deceptive hopes and renouncing them. The result is first of all the clear, undeceptive mind. Which nods wisely and cleverly, being freed of, or rejecting hope.

The “vast stretch” found once the deceptive and self-deceptive hopes have been slowly abandoned is of course deserted and sad... But it is real and authentic. Like the stars. So this is precisely the spot of the Nothing, on whose branch the shivering heart – and life – sits, mortally and questioning-searchingly, in the “company” of stars **ever since the origins**.

Is this all perhaps only and exclusively the experience of a “strange-special” “individual” called “Attila József”? Or simply a wonderfully concocted poetic image?

The answer lies again in the consideration of the name or word of the Nothing. For we have seen that the word “Semmi”, also used by Attila József, expresses the NEM in the **first person plural**. Which then inhales every individual in the Nothing and with the Nothing... (We/Mi = all of us and any of us.)

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Finally... : “Man comes at last...”

Translated by Emese Czintos