

# ANUARIO DE LETRAS MODERNAS

FACULTAD DE FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS  
UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL AUTÓNOMA DE MÉXICO

**VOLUMEN 7    MÉXICO    1995-1996**

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### *Secretaria:*

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*Cuidado de la edición:* Raúl Gutiérrez Moreno

*Diseño:* Mauricio López Valdés

DR© 1997, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras  
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México  
Ciudad Universitaria, 04510, México, D. F.  
Impreso y hecho en México  
ISSN 0186-0526

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The Nothing that from Nothing Came.  
From Epicurean to Heideggerian Nothingness  
in Shakespeare's *King Lear*

Juan Carlos RODRÍGUEZ AGUILAR  
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

**Prelude**

Consider the following:  
That was Nothing.  
Now consider the following carefully:

nullam rem e nihilo gigni diuinitus umquam.  
[...]  
Quas ob res ubi uiderimus nil posse creari  
de nihilo, tum quod sequimur iam rectius inde  
perspiciemus, et unde queat res quaeque creari,  
et quo quaeque modo fiant opera sine diuon.  
Nam si de nihilo fierent, ex omnibu'rebus  
omne genus nasci posset, nil semine egeret.  
E mare primum homines, e terra possit oriri  
squamigerum genus, et uolucres erumpere caelo:  
armenta atque aliae pecudes, genus omne ferarum,  
incerto partu culta ac deserta teneret.  
Nec fructus idem arboribus constare solerent,  
sed mutarentur; ferre omnes omnia possent.  
Quippe ubi non essent genitalia corpora cuique.  
qui posset mater rebus consistere certa?  
At nunc seminibus quia certis quaque creantur,  
inde enascitur atque oras in luminis exit  
materies ubi inest cuiusque et corpora prima;  
atque hac re nequeunt ex omnibus omnis gigni,  
quod certis in rebus inest secretas facultas.  
Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, I, 155-173.

Cum loquamur de naturalibus, ex nihilo nihil fit;  
cum de theologicis, ex nihilo fit ens creatum.  
Saint Thomas Aquinas.

A non-existent object cannot be conceived as non-existent.

Spencer, *First Principles*, II, 4.

La représentation du vide est toujours une représentation pleine, qui se résout à l'analyse en deux éléments positifs: l'idée, distincte ou confuse, d'une substitution, et le sentiment, éprouvé ou imaginé, d'un désir ou d'un regret [...] il y a plus et non pas moins, dans l'idée d'un objet conçu comme "n'existant pas", car l'idée de l'objet "n'existant pas", est nécessairement l'idée de l'objet "existant" avec, en plus, la représentation d'une exclusion de cet objet par la réalité prise en bloc.

Henri Bergson, *L'Évolution Créatrice*, 306, 310.

[...] so bestehen ihre Bestimmtheit, das Seyn uns das Nichts der Qualitäten; die andere Seite ist das Nichts derselben, und so sind sie bezogen, in der Beziehung aber sind sie Nichts; auf welche Weise immer nur das Seyn der Qualitäten, und das ausser dem Seyn fallende Nichts derselben gesetzt wäre, nicht ein Nichts; das so bezogen ist auf das Seyn, daß beide bestehen.

George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Logik*, I, 2.

" $x \ N \ t$ " is defined as "there exists no  $t_1$  belonging to an individual  $x$  that relates  $P$  to  $x$  (where  $P$  is a proposition by means of which a time  $t$  is part of an individual  $x$ , if  $x$  is an individual that persists through all time  $t$ )", then " $x \ N \ t$ " could be read as " $x$  is null (or non-actual [-real, -effective]) during time  $t$ ";  $x$  is thus the "null individual"  $x$  is "Nothing" at all times.

M. Martins, "The Null Individual..."

That was "nothing" (*nomen finitum*) about Nothing (*nomen infinitum*). The question is: is it still nothing?

## Two Types of Nothing

### *Epicurean Nothing*

Nil igitur fieri de nilo posse fatendumst,  
 haud igitur possunt ad nilum quaeque reverti.  
 Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, I, 205, 237.

Nothing is no-thing. The problem with defining “Nothing”<sup>1</sup> is that one normally begins “nothing is...” and then one affirms, through the predicate, “nothing is not”. If something is not, how can it then be itself? That is, how can anything deprived of being be? For the Greek philosophers “nothing” was equal to “Non-being”. That is, nothingness appears only through the denial of being. Unfortunately this cancels out the concept of “Nothing”. For Parmenides and the Eliatics the argument was quite simple: Only two options are possible: Being and Non-being. Being is; Non-being is not. Nothing is Non-being (*i.e.* Nothing is not Being). Therefore, Nothing is not. There is nothing we can say about Nothing. Any proposition which does not refer to an existent object is deprived of sense. Megarian logic, for example, utterly declined to even consider Nothing amidst its premises. It was on this tradition of thought that Lucretius, representative of the Epicurians, coined an expression that was to obsess Western philosophy through the centuries: *ex nihilo nihil fit*, nothing comes from Nothing. To deny this, he argued, would mean to destroy the notion of causality, to admit that anything could emerge at any time from anywhere. To think that things were created at random out of the blue was, of course, non-sense. It was a real aberration for the classical mind.

The problem began with Christian philosophy. The concept of “creation” denied the *ex nihilo nihil fit* principle. It implied rather *ex nihilo fit ens creatum*: created being comes from Nothing. Saint Thomas Aquinas found, as usual, a very clever and convenient solution: no created being can absolutely produce another being. The world (the Universe) in its entirety is a created being. Thus, God created the world out of nothing (*ex nihilo fit ens creatum*) but within this created world, nothing can be created from Nothing (*ex nihilo nihil fit*); which means, simply, that Nothing belongs only in a theological—and never in a physical—sphere. Lear, at the beginning of Shakespeare’s play, belongs to

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this essay I will refer to the *nomen finitum* (*i.e.* the concrete signifier, the word, the symbol, the finite noun) as “nothing”, and to the *nomen infinitum* (*i.e.* something abstract, the object signified, the infinite noun) as “Nothing”. I will avoid quotation marks whenever possible.



this tradition. He belongs in a tradition of materialism that never questioned Democritus's atom-created Universe.

### *Heideggerian Nothing*

[...] the wind blows  
For the listener, who listens in the snow  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.  
Wallace Stevens, "The Snow Man".

Aristotle thought about it but never developed the thought fully.<sup>2</sup> If Nothing is no-thing; that is, if it is non-being, then it is but the privative category of being. Since it depends on the primary existence of Being, then we can say that non-being actually exists. Hence something can come from Nothing.

Kant integrated the idea of Nothing in his system of transcendental analysis. For him Nothing exists as a complement, as part of the concept of object to which all the Aristotelian categories can be applied.<sup>3</sup> Hegel went a step further: Being and Non-being are equally indeterminate. Being —*i.e.* the thing that is immediately determined— is really Nothing. "Nothing" shows exactly the same "determination" —or lack thereof— as Being does. For, in an attempt to attain "absolute purity", Being must be previously emptied of all references, and what one can say about Being is the same as what one can say about Non-being. Therefore Being and Nothing are the same.<sup>4</sup> Bergson believed that the representation of an object as non-existent adds something to —rather than withdraws from— the idea of the object: in particular, it adds the concept of exclusion. Hence there exists more —as opposed to less— in a non-existent object than in an existent one.<sup>5</sup> The final step in this direction was taken by Heidegger (and Sartre), for whom the concept of Nothing cannot be explained by means of logical analysis. "Nothing" is not the denial of Being, but the element that permits the operation of denial itself. It is the element within which Existence flows, "swimming desperately lest it drown". Being is then a consequence of Nothing (and not the other way around); "nothing", in turn, implies "being", ontologically speaking.

<sup>2</sup> ARISTOTLE, *Physics*, apud José FERRATER MORA, "Nada", in *Diccionario de filosofía*, v. 3.

<sup>3</sup> KANT, apud in *loc. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> G. W. F. HEGEL, *Logik*, apud in *loc. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Henri BERGSON, *L'évolution créatrice*, apud in *loc. cit.*

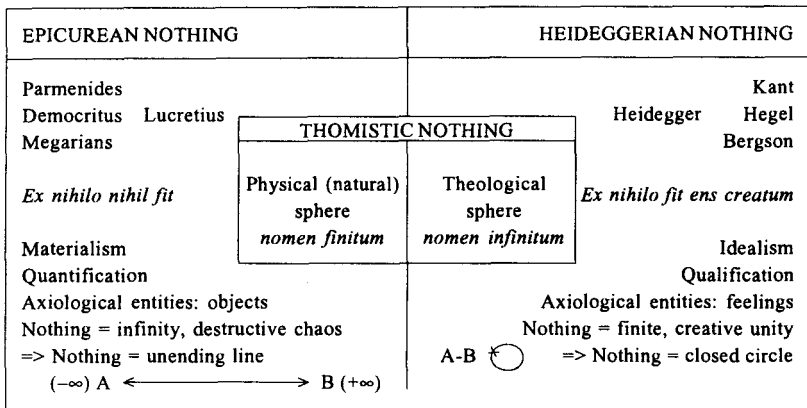


Diagram 1. The two concepts of Nothing

At the beginning of Shakespeare's tragedy *Lear* embodies Epicurean Nothing while Cordelia embodies Heideggerian Nothing. The first appearance of Nothing (assuming Nothing can appear) already states the conflict that will be developed throughout the play and which, in a way, summarises acts I and II:

CORDELIA: Nothing, my lord.

LEAR: Nothing?

CORDELIA: Nothing.

LEAR: Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.

(I, i, 83-86)<sup>6</sup>

Though visually the same, the four references to Nothing in this excerpt differ greatly. Their symmetrical distribution (alternation) helps to emphasize the contrast. The fourth line comes directly out of Lucretius. Lear's nothing is, quite clearly, Epicurean Nothing, materialistic Nothing (the subject of the sentence is the immediate substitution of a quantity: Cordelia's third part of the Kingdom). Its predicate (prepositional phrase) refers to Cordelia's Nothing. Thus Lear's sentence "Nothing will come of nothing" can be read as "My (Epicurean concept of) nothing will come of your (non-Epicurean concept of) Nothing". The references to "Nothing at either side of the verb are opposite. Cordelia's non-Epicurean Nothing is, as yet, a vague notion for Lear, which,

<sup>6</sup> All quotes from Shakespeare's text are taken from Bernard Lott's edition: *King Lear*. Longman, New Swan Shakespeare Advanced Series. From here on, the act, scene and line numbers will appear in parentheses at the bottom of each quotation.

somehow, does not fit into his *Weltanschauung*; therefore, it is bound to question it (I, i, 84). The play as a whole depends on this question. Throughout the five acts of this tragedy the King questions himself and others about Cordelia's concept of Nothing, since he finds it at this moment quite unintelligible. After her sisters' verbose and materialistic rhetoric demonstrating their love for their father —reflected in an overdose of rhetoric and verbosity for the audience— Cordelia's exposition is surprisingly succinct, almost tacit. Her words are fully Bergsonian (the representation of an object as non-existent adds something to that of the object as existent). Her "nothing" is a far wider concept than Goneril's or Regan's allness, adding more to their "everything". Her "nothing" is Heideggerian; it does not consider love as a quantitative but as a qualitative axiological entity. Lear, who encounters this Nothing unawares, initially perceives it as equivalent to his Epicurean Nothing: as an absence of being, as an utter want of existence. He finds himself in the midst of a dark lake; Cordelia's word is for him an ultimate darkness which blinds him. He does not yet possess the tools required to see in this spiritual, non-materialistic nothingness. Nor does he have the eyes to perceive the allness hiding beneath it. This, for a king like Lear, is an infuriating experience. Thus, he becomes the dragon, the inhuman beast. His destructive violence nonetheless is unable to alter Cordelia's absolute peace. Her determination is such that, after Lear's question, she does not only repeat her "nothing" again but also substantiates it with arguments. Cordelia embodies that tacit nothing so perfectly that after this scene she vanishes from the stage and remains "nothing" for at least three quarters of the play. She is the perfect circle: nothing containing everything. She stands for the personification of Heidegger's Nothing. She is the element out of which Being —the play, Lear's character— is created. She triggers the conflict, the momentum that sets the tragedy going. She accomplishes all this creation with only two words —indeed, with the repetition of a single word. It will take Lear eight long speeches and a great deal of dramatic input to understand her words.

I propose here that Lear experiences a shift of consciousness that leads him from Epicurean to Heideggerian Nothing. In the following acts, Lear's "nothing" evolves, parallel to his character, until it joins Cordelia's Nothing.

Just as I attempted a diagram contrasting the two types of Nothing, I attempt here another diagram contrasting the characters of the play in terms of the sort of Nothing they can be associated with:

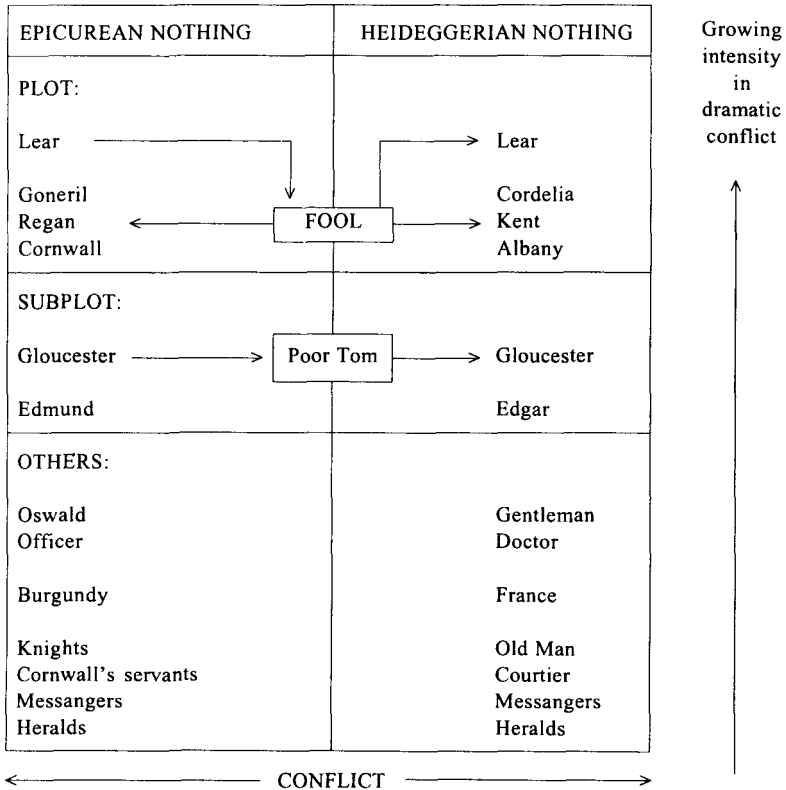


Diagram 2. Census of characters

## Madness: the Abyss Between Epicurean and Heideggerian Nothing

Enfin, dernier type de folie: celle de la *passion désespérée*. L'amour déçu dans son excès, l'amour surtout trompé par la fatalité de la mort t'a d'autre issue que la démence [...] Si elle conduit à la mort, c'est à une mort où ceux qui s'aiment ne seront jamais plus séparés. C'est la dernière chanson d'Ophélie; c'est le

délire d'Ariste dans *La Folie du sage*. Mais c'est surtout l'amère et douce démente du *Roi Lear*.

Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, I, 49.

### *Das Narrenschiff*

In between the two sorts of nothing there lies an immense Ocean, an abyss of desolation that can only be endured through madness. Lear sails, first tempestuously then slowly, across this vast Ocean. His means of transportation is the Ship of Fools. The captain of this ship is the Fool in the play: the instrument of Lear's epiphany and transformation. He takes Lear to an imaginary *Narragonia*: *Das Narrenschiff* travels through the woodlands (i.e. a metaphoric Ocean) under foul weather. Lear's *Stultifera navis* happens upon dire straits somewhere on a heath (III, ii). The elements are mad, rage blinds the King. The King is mad, therefore the King is dead.

In the Renaissance, the medieval concept of death is substituted by the concept of madness (death inside, Nothing inside). Madness is no longer an illuminated state (divine inspiration). It is the denial of Existence within, it is a "vacuum indoors".<sup>7</sup> Internal death leads to external death (and rebirth). The madman is isolated from the world. This cleaves an unfathomable abyss between the objects (universe of what is seen) and the naming of these objects (universe of what is told).<sup>8</sup> The quantifiable material things do not correspond to the immaterial qualifiable names we give them. Lear's atom-created universe, his Epicurean world-picture, is destroyed. Thus, he learns to "see" what lies beneath words. His madness enables him to see "everything" behind "nothing". Only at this stage is he able to understand Cordelia's Nothing.

The character of Lear and his concept of Nothing evolve together because Lear and Nothing have become the same thing (the same non-thing). He is mad and therefore dead inside. In Goneril's and Regan's eyes he has become nothing. Of course this is a dialectical interpretation: seen from Lear's newly-acquired point of view, Regan and Goneril do not mean much and he wishes they would become nothing. For example, he invokes supernatural forces in order to make Goneril dead inside:

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Michel FOUCAULT, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, c. 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Vid. ib.*, *Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie de sciences humaines*.

LEAR: Hear nature, hear: dear goddess hear!  
 Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend  
 To make this creature fruitful!  
 Into her womb convey sterility! [Nothingness]  
 Dry up in her the organs of increase,  
 And from her derogate body never spring  
 A babe to honour her!  
 (I, iv, 260-266.)

By the fourth scene of the following act, Goneril has truly become nothing in the eyes of the King:

LEAR: [...] Beloved Regan,  
 Thy sister is naught.  
 (II, iv, 128-129.)

As Lear grows in dimension towards allness, his two evil daughters gradually decrease until internal death is matched by external nothing and they meet their physical death. Of course Cordelia and Lear also die, but their death is different from Goneril's and Regan's death. Their death is not a vacuum but an inner "plenum". It is a space entirely detached from matter, where the loving father and the gentle daughter will never be separated one from the other.

The general trend of this tragedy is from external (*e.g.* Lear's wrath and violence) to internal madness (*e.g.* Lear is "mad" in the same way as Cordelia or as the Fool is). In fact, we might interpret this as the transition from insanity without to sanity within. In this respect, it is all the antagonistic characters that compose the "mad (-dening) crowd". The play seems to be asking the audience continuously: "Guess who is mad now?"

The same trend is mirrored on either side of the vertical axis of our census of characters (*vid.* Diagram 2, *supra*). As the characters listed on the right-hand side grow in dramatic stature, the antagonistic characters listed on the left-hand side diminish, are corrupted and tend to an eventual dissolution (death). Heideggerian Nothing disintegrates and destroys the objective, logical and quantifiable Epicurean Nothing.

*The Fool*

FOOL: Now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art now; I am a fool, thou art nothing.

William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, I, iv, 175-176.

The fool is the last arcane in the Tarot. It is distinguished by its lack of a figure (in both senses: numerical value and shape). The fool is the symbol of mediating nothingness; of indetermination. The Fool in *King Lear* also performs the same function as in the European folk tradition: he is the healer, the doctor. When the consciousness and the established order have become sick or evil, only the intervention of danger, of unconsciousness, of abnormality can restore good and order; thus madness and ridicule are, in this case, the appropriate medicine.

According to Mircea Eliade,<sup>9</sup> the fool “has the tendency to melt the solidity of the world”. The word “fool” comes from latin “follis” (that is, “bellows”, “windbag”). It implies lightness and emotion; it implies processuality. Fools and clowns are ambiguous, ambivalent creatures. They are zero because they do not belong anywhere. They are paradoxical figures who, being neither wholly wise nor foolish, are both. A fool is “a cultural construct with a sense of incompleteness, yet whole (a lump [*i.e.* an imperfect circle]), that is in a condition of transformation (congelation) but is somehow out of place in context (a clod)”.<sup>10</sup> Associated as they are in dramas and folk rites with seasonal transitions “especially those from winter to summer, and so with notions of the regeneration of natural and social orders, folk fools played the role of masters of ceremonies. These characters tended to be killed and revived in these events”.<sup>11</sup> In *King Lear* the Fool is the master of ceremonies that communicates with the audience. His satiric remarks serve as a bridge between the characters and the public. But he is also Lear’s master: he *leads* Lear from one order to another. Since the Fool is mad (that is, already dead inside, nothing inside) the only sort of death he can undergo is physical disappearance. In our text the Fool disappears but his function is subsequently fulfilled by Lear. The King becomes the new Fool, and then he too dies. The revival of the Fool (whether this character be understood as the Fool himself, as Lear or as Cordelia) always has “a sense of incompleteness”. That is probably why the idea that Edgar will restore order upon Lear’s death is not very convincing. The problem is that

<sup>9</sup> Mircea ELIADE, *The Encyclopedia of Religions*, v. 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>11</sup> *Idem.*

even though Edgar's feigned madness/nothingness ("Edgar I nothing am" II, iii, 21), is too intense at times to be a mere histrionic attitude, it is still a weak feature in his characterization. Edgar's individual personality eludes us completely, he is an allegorical character most of the time (Poor Tom, Avenging Knight). We cannot trust him as a true "revived fool", as a true "restorer of order".

Cordelia, as the embodiment of non-Epicurean Nothing, is too perfectly nothing, too perfect a circle, to carry out the functions of the Fool. The Fool is the more down-to-earth, immanent version of that same Nothing. He is an imperfect circle, which presents certain irregularities which other characters can grasp. No characters can keep a firm hold of Cordelia's perfectly smooth circumference. It is too slippery. It contains no entrances or exits. The Fool, in turn, opens doors, guides characters to new entrances, transgresses boundaries and breaks conventions. He annihilates himself so that Lear can have access to one of those entrances. As Sir James Frazer put it, fools are victims of substitution, they are the key element in ritual human sacrifices.<sup>12</sup> "The raillery of the fool and his frequent ritual association with a mock king<sup>13</sup> suggests that he may have originated as a sacrificial scapegoat substituted for a royal victim [...] Fools were kept on the belief that deformity can avert the evil eye and that the abusive raillery can transfer ill-luck from the abused to the abuser".<sup>14</sup> This is precisely what Shakespeare's fools do. Language is the key they use to open doors for some and to close them to others. The Fool in *King Lear* transforms the fixed categories of performance and narrative commonly integrated and organized by means of linguistic boundaries. We only have to leaf through the text to realise that whenever there is a drastic sudden change in the length of the lines or the rhythm in the poetry, this occurs either in the Fool's speeches or as a consequence of them.

As the Fool mode of expression gradually contaminates Lear's own words (and results in Lear's mad speeches), the semantic register of the sentences and phrases tends to chaos. Lear can utter statements that are epigrammatic truths next to (and even in the same line as) completely non-sensical statements which signify nothing. His discourse is one step ahead of the Fool's, which, though remarkably polisemic, still makes sense. The Fool fragments the acknowledged, intelligible discourse and scrambles its parts. As he reintegrates it into a new, never-thought-of discourse, it is not improbable that new truths—recognized by the audience as transcendental reality—are uttered lightly

<sup>12</sup> Sir James FRAZER, *The Golden Bough*, *apud* in *loc. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> Cf. FOOLS Literature XVth to XVIIth centuries.

<sup>14</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Micropaedia*, v. VI, p. 220.



but mordaciously, as if it were a premeditated pseudo-product of chance.

By the time the Fool disappears, he has as it were, worked an explosion within language in order that he may open the circle and allow Lear to enter Heideggerian Nothing. The re-emergence of simple truths after the explosion, after verbal incoherence, is equal to the closing of the circle (integration).

The line resulting from the explosion of the circle is infinite (remember only that the length between points A and B is equal to " $\pi$ " —a so-called "irrational", infinite number: 3.14159...). Goneril's and Regan's linguistic fault, for example, is that they explode the circle with their excess of rhetoric, but they prove unable to integrate it back into the circumference; that is, into the simpler language of deeply-felt, non-rhetorical love. These operations of explosion and integration constitute the stuff that validates the proposition "nothing does come from Nothing", *i.e.* Something —infinity— comes from itself.

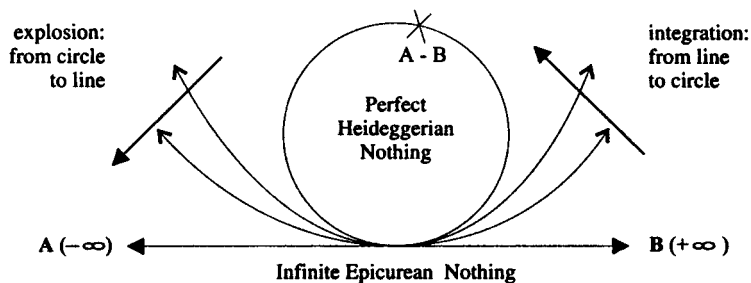


Diagram 3. The circle and the line.

Endlessness mirrors endlessness back. The result of this continuous reflection would amount to the mathematical impossibility represented by Nothing<sup>nothing</sup> *i.e.* "Nothing" elevated to the nothing<sup>th</sup> power. This mathematical impossibility is materialised in the radical divorce between words and objects. Lexikon is not to be interpreted on its basic plane (on its degree zero) but on its higher metaphorical levels. The more far-fetched the metaphor, the more one can perceive. This is the raw material of Lear's mad speeches.

*The eyes of madness*

The irruption of Nothing implies the incapability to see any material objects (simply because there exists nothing before one's eyes). Sight and blindness play a highly significant role in the imagery of Nothingness. The character's eyes, accustomed to materialistic nothing only, cannot sense Heideggerian Nothing. Gloucester says "The quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself. Let's see; come, if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles" (I, ii, 33-35). But he will need them, because he cannot even suspect what lies beneath Edmund's "nothing". Lear's reaction to Goneril's attitude is phrased as follows:

LEAR: [...] Old fond eyes  
 Beweep this cause again, I'll pluck ye out  
 And cast you with the waters that you loose  
 To temper clay. Yea, is it come to this?  
 Let it be so.  
 (I, iv, 286-290)

Eyes are dangerous too. Albany says to Goneril: "How far your eyes may pierce I cannot tell. / Striving the better, oft we mar what's well". (I, iv, 331-332). To become physically blind is an act that substitutes the role of the Fool. Gloucester sends the King to Dover because he would not see his daughters' cruel nails pluck out his poor eyes (III, vii, 55-56). So they pluck out Gloucester's own instead. Lear's prophecy (see quote above) is fulfilled not on himself but on his *alter ego* —on the shadow that his character casts on the subplot. Lear's spiritual pain is mirrored as physical pain in Gloucester. Gloucester has no fool to open a way for him into the circle (Poor Tom is not around when he is blinded). His entrance to it, is only secured by means of a horribly violent act. Whether spiritual in Lear's case or physical in Gloucester's, pain is the punishment they pay for not having seen before, and it is through this punishment that they learn to see. Pain is the eye of madness.

## The Maddening Tread of Generations

Quizá la historia universal es la historia de unas cuantas metáforas [...] en el *Timeo*, de Platón, se lee que la esfera es la figura más perfecta y más uniforme, porque todos los puntos equidistan del centro [...] Alain de Lille —Alanus de Insulis— descubrió a finales del siglo XII esta fórmula que las edades venideras no olvidarían: “Dios es una esfera inteligible, cuyo centro está en todas partes y la circunferencia en ninguna”.  
Jorge Luis Borges, “La esfera de Pascal”.

It is clear to me that the *leitmotiv* in Shakespeare's *King Lear* is “Nothing”. A map of the directions in the development of this *leitmotiv* could read as follows:

1. The two concepts of nothing	I, i, 83-86	7. Man=Nothing	III, iv, 97-98
2. Seeing nothing	I, ii, 35-37	8. World=Nothing	IV, vi, 133
3. Nothing=O without a figure	I, iv, 175	9. No offence	IV, vi, 162
4. Sterility=Nothing inside	I, iv, 213	10. No hatred	IV, vii, 77
5. Nothing=Change in social status	II, iii, 21	11. Full circle	IV, iii, 174
6. Say Nothing=Patience	III, ii, 36	12. No-thing=no-time	V, iii, 305-309

Diagram 4. Trends of the *leitmotiv*

The general trend favours the Heideggerian kind of Nothing instead of the Epicurean one. The tendency, geometrically speaking, goes from the line to the circle. A circle is the symbol of zero. One culture that discovered zero —the Mayan culture— believed that the nothing inside the symbol (in the case of the Maya, a shell) stands for infinite regeneration. The Arabic tradition, which brought this figure/number to Europe in the shape of a circle, knew that the nothing inside is the perfect representation of allness. It is the integral symbol that rounds up all points (innumerable) into harmony by making it equidistant from the centre.

The conflict in *King Lear* is also a conflict of generations: an opposition of the Medieval and the Renaissance man. In a way, it is a numerical opposition. On the one hand, Medieval culture did not know vacuity; it was a filled unity. Its symbol was number 1. Medieval civilization did not know the figure zero. Renaissance culture, on the other hand, was a culture based on the number zero. It discovered the functions of Nothing; it calculated equations and

described the Universe anew because of this discovery. Its symbol was the circle, the number 0. It had the knowledge to correct Lucretius: "Omnia res ex nihilo venire atque ad nihilum reverti potest. Omnia res nulla res est".

Our culture seems to have gone all the way from a second to a third dimension: it made the sphere its symbol; but nowadays it claims to have broken it, to have gone beyond it. Our contemporary (re-)correction of Lucretius's already-corrected phrase is something, I must confess, that escapes me.

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