

NARRATIVES OF NOTHING  
IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERATURE

by

MEGHAN CHRISTINE VICKS

B.A., Middlebury College, 2003

M.A., University of Colorado, 2007

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This thesis entitled:  
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has been approved for the Department of Comparative Literature

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Mark Leiderman

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Jeremy Green

---

Ringaila Salys

---

Davide Stimilli

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Eric White

November 11, 2011

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

Vicks, Meghan Christine (Ph.D., Comparative Literature)

Narratives of Nothing in Twentieth-Century Literature

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Mark Leiderman (Lipovetsky)

This study begins with the observation that much of twentieth-century art, literature, and philosophy exhibits a concern with nothing itself. Both Martin Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre, for example, perceive that nothing is part-and-parcel of (man's) being. The present study adopts a similar position concerning nothing and its essential relationship to being, but adds a third element: that of writing narrative. This relationship between nothing and narrative is, I argue, established in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, Mikhail Bakhtin, Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva. As Heidegger and Sartre position nothing as essential to the creation of being, so Nietzsche, Bakhtin, Derrida, and Kristeva figure nothing as essential to the production of narrative. The parallels between their theories regarding nothing and being, and nothing and narrative, are particularly telling, especially as the twentieth century deconstructs our notions of reality and fiction, rendering these increasingly indistinguishable from one another.

This thesis regarding nothing's relationship to narrative is further developed through analysis of the literary works of Nikolai Gogol, Herman Melville, Vladimir Nabokov, Samuel Beckett, and Victor Pelevin. These authors compose literature that not only gives narrative form to nothing itself (narratives *about* nothing), but that also envisions nothing as a generator of narrative (narratives *of* nothing). My phrase *narratives of nothing* indicates the symbiotic relationship between nothing and writing, wherein nothing resides at the forever-deferring center of a semiotic system that produces writing, narrative fiction, and thus "reality" as we know it. In each of the texts I have selected, there is a clear relationship established between (1) the act of

writing, producing narrative and/or meaning, and (2) nothing or one of its many signifiers (e.g. void, cipher, zero, etc.).

My analysis ultimately refigures the transcendental signified as nothing itself. Nothing as the transcendental signified is therefore the ever-deferring generator of a system of signifiers that perpetually recreate their own original transcendental signified. Because of this, nothing as the transcendental signified is an *infinite* nothing that constantly transforms depending on its own signifiers' significations.

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## Chapter Zero Introduction

### I. “... You ain’t heard nothin’ yet.”<sup>1</sup>

What is it about the human condition that even allows us to conceive of and question nothing itself, and to generate various signifiers of nothing, such as zero? For when one thinks about it, nothing, (as trite as it sounds), quite simply does not exist.

What about destruction? – one may ask. Two jet planes crashing into the Twin Towers, causing their collapse: no more towers, no more jet planes, just Ground Zero left in the wake of the attack. Isn’t that nothing? Don’t we say, “There’s nothing left”? Aren’t we now honoring that space with the National September 11 Memorial, formally known as *Reflecting Absence*?<sup>2</sup>

We may say, “There’s nothing left,” but this does not seem accurate upon further examination: the material is all still there, but in another form. Were it not for human consciousness imagining, expecting, remembering the towers and finding them absent, there would be no appearance of nothing, only the appearance of something else (and even this “something else” is up for debate, also likely dependent upon human consciousness). There is being before the jet planes hit the towers, and there is being afterwards. There is no nothing.

Additionally, the problem is made even more complex when we acknowledge that there is a significant difference between nothing and absence, even though these are oftentimes used as synonyms in common parlance, and certainly shade into one another through their similar

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<sup>1</sup> Al Jolson, *The Jazz Singer* (1927); first words spoken in the first widely-seen talking film.

<sup>2</sup> In the words of the architects Michael Arad and Peter Walker, “This memorial proposes a space that resonates with *the feelings of loss and absence* that were generated by the destruction of the World Trade Center and the taking of thousands of lives on September 11, 2001 and February 26, 1993. It is located in a field of trees that is interrupted by two large voids containing recessed pools. The pools and the ramps that surround them encompass the footprints of the twin towers. A cascade of water that describes the perimeter of each square feeds the pools with a continuous stream. *They are large voids, open and visible reminders of the absence*” (emphasis mine).

characteristics. Unlike nothing, absence traditionally figures in opposition to presence, carries with it the expectation of a presence, or is distinguished by a presence that has been lost or no longer exists. As such, absence is intimately related to negation or negativity; it is the negation of a presence that produces emptiness. In *The Theory of Absence* (1995), Patrick Fuery explores in depth the “relational schema” between absence and presence, which “[leads] to the conceptual figuring of absence and absences only because there is a presence, or a register of presence, to begin with. Absence is seen to be derived from a state of presence, as it is seen as the denial of presence” (1). Through his analysis, he attempts to deconstruct this traditional binary opposition of absence and presence, demonstrating how absence in and of itself produces desire, which in turn creates the subject: “one of the most *essential* sites of subjectivity,” Fuery argues, is “that of the desiring subject determined by absence. This site operates as a repository for different types of absences (including desire) as well as the scene of production and consumption of desire as an absence” (11). Subjectivity and desire become expressions of absence, not a nullification of absence; absence is not simply the lack or loss of a presence, but subject-creating desire in its own right. Still, even in Fuery’s deconstructive psychoanalytical reading of absence, there is an intimate and mutually-informing/signifying relationship between absence and presence. When we speak of absence, we are speaking of a *something* in addition to nothing itself.

In contrast, nothing falls beyond this system of absences and presences, although philosophers debate whether or not nothing precedes or follows negation, absence, and being. Is nothing more original than negation, more fundamental than being, or is it an effect of being and negation? This wholly ambiguous characterization of nothing has its most famous and influential predecessor in Odysseus, whose name is believed to have sounded much like the word for “nobody” in some ancient Greek dialects – a coincidence that comes in handy, or course, when

Odysseus is trapped in Polyphemus' cave. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno pinpoint this "nobody" as the functioning core of a dialectic that establishes Odysseus' identity through a lack, a dialectic that comes to define modern subjectivity: "Like the heroes of all true novels later on, Odysseus loses himself in order to find himself; the estrangement from nature that he brings about is realized in the process of the abandonment to nature he contends with in each adventure" (47-48). Later, Horkheimer and Adorno even connect this nobody-fueled dialectic of Odysseus' identity with modern mathematics, whose schema, as I will later discuss, is dependent upon a zero: "Odysseus' two contradictory actions in his encounter with Polyphemus, his answering to the name, and his disowning it, are nevertheless one. He acknowledges himself to himself by denying himself under the name Nobody; he saves his life by losing himself. This linguistic adaptation to death contains the schema of modern mathematics" (60). The name Nobody both denies (makes absent) and affirms (makes present) Odysseus' identity; it illustrates the very paradox of nothingness that later theoretical discussions uncover and debate (see "Chapter One"). In these discussions, nothing is figured as outside any binary system, or, on the contrary, as residing at their liminal position – between presence and absence, but neither present nor absent.

This ambiguous character of nothing has an additional important predecessor in Plato's treatment of *khôra* (from *Timaeus* [c. 360 BCE]), which Jacques Derrida discusses in his essay "*Khôra*" (1987). Derrida considers *khôra* to function as an allegory of *différance* in Plato's two-realm paradigm. In the allegory of the cave, Plato designates two realms: the upper realm of eternal, invisible, unchanging forms of being, and the lower realm of transitory, changing, and visible representations of the forms of being. This neat distinction is complicated, Derrida argues, by Plato's discussion of *khôra*, which falls outside this schematic, or acts as both of the

two realms at once. Derrida writes, “The *khôra* seems to be alien to the order of the ‘paradigm,’ that intelligible and immutable model” (“*Khôra*,” 231). *Khôra* is described by Plato as an ambiguous receptacle that provides the space in which the representations of the eternal forms are engendered; as such, it shares qualities with both the upper and lower realms of the two-realm paradigm. Derrida heightens this ambiguity of *khôra* by refusing to use a translation of the word throughout his essay, but he explains that it may be understood as something akin to an abyss or void; it is also the infinite play of reflections: “an apparently empty space – even though it is no doubt not emptiness” (ibid, 241). Derrida offers *khôra* as *différance*’s “surname,” but we may also view *khôra* as an allegory of nothing. *Khôra* is the abyss-like home that generates all things; Odysseus is the nobody-subject whose journey home has become the cornerstone, the generative principle of Western literature and modern subjectivity – both function as allegories of the ambiguous workings of nothing.

It turns out that nothing has been an enduring concern of human philosophy, religion, and science for much of recorded time, and man’s preoccupation with nothing, along with his *capacity* to conceive of nothing, became topics of great philosophical weight during the twentieth century. After all, as Heidegger, Sartre, and other philosophers are exploring the ontological relationship between being and nothingness, twentieth- and twenty-first-century artists, writers, poets, musicians, and literary critics alike are increasingly concerned with nothing itself and its signifiers, and many of these centuries’ defining cultural movements position nothing as a major theme, or employ it as an aesthetic tool or form. Dada’s anti-art, for example, parodies the meaninglessness of modern existence, often mournfully exalting the nothingness at culture’s core: proclaims Francis Picabia (“who knows nothing, nothing, nothing”) in his 1920 “Dada Manifesto,” “DADA wants nothing, nothing, nothing, it acts to

make the public say: ‘We know nothing, nothing, nothing.’” In *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer* (1991), Richard Huelsenbeck reiterates Picabia’s sentiment when he reflects, “We displayed our scorn for conventional substance, we proclaimed the loss of any center. [...] [Dada] developed out of nothing into something, but even in somethingness, it never lost the feeling of nothingness” (71, 79). A similar attitude is apparent in the Russian avant-garde collective known as OBERIU (Объединение реального искусства, Association for Real Art), which was founded by Daniil Kharms, Alexander Vvedensky, and Konstantin Vaginov in the 1920s. The *oberiuty* refused to conform to “good taste,” sought to uncover reality through absurdity in both form and subject, vehemently rejected the Romantic notion of the artist as genius (the poet-prophet), and experimented with minimal forms of writing. Prior to the establishment of the OBERIU, minimalist writing had already long been a fixture of the Russian avant-garde; Vasilisk Gnedov’s «Поэма конца» (“Poem of the End,” 1913) is one of the most extreme examples of such writing, featuring a blank page with nothing but a title, number, and publisher’s seal.<sup>3</sup> Especially the writings of Kharms draw from this minimalist tradition, depicting a world where an absurd spectacle resting upon an unstructured and unruly nonexistence is all that exists; as Adrian Wanner comments, “Kharms seems to mobilize his narratives literally *for nothing*” (132, emphasis in the original).<sup>4</sup> As we will see in “Chapter Five,” this idea crystallizes in post-Soviet postmodern literature, which presents a world wholly comprised of a spectacle generated by a nothing that functions as the transcendental signified.

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<sup>3</sup> Wanner notes that “Poem of the End” was very popular in public readings: “Gnedov would raise his arm and then quickly let it fall in a dramatic gesture, eliciting stormy applause from the audience” (132).

<sup>4</sup> For more on OBERIU, Kharms, and their play with the absurd and nothingness, see Neil Cornwell’s “Daniil Kharms as Mimimalist-Absurdist” (2006), and Mark Lipovetsky’s chapter on Kharms in *Паралогии* (2008, 141-179).

In the musical field, explorations with silence become increasingly popular in the twentieth century. The most famous example is the work of composer John Cage, who, in 1952, premiers *4'33''*, a piece that consists of four minutes and thirty-three seconds during which the musician does not play his or her instrument. Cage explains that his aim was to create the musical equivalent of temperature's absolute zero, the degree at which all motion stops.<sup>5</sup> However, *4'33''* makes obvious, more than anything, how difficult it is to actually hear silence (or that silence is an *imaginary*, not an actual, state), teeming as the world is with ambient sounds; writes Cage, "There are, demonstrably, sounds to be heard and forever, given ears to hear" (23). Still, as imaginary as absolute silence may be, Cage's composition, in addition to many studies in musicology, highlight silence's relationship to music and, indeed, to language as well: in both, silence plays a vital role.

All music emerges from silence, to which sooner or later it must return. At its simplest we may conceive of music as the relationship between sounds and the silence that surrounds them. Yet silence is an imaginary state in which all sounds are absent, akin perhaps to the infinity of time and space that surrounds us. We cannot even hear utter silence, nor can we fully conceive of infinity and eternity. (Hillier 134)

Or, as Keith Jarrett so eloquently puts it, "Silence is the potential from which music can arise. Music is the 'activity-of-meaning' that is able to be actualized only because of silence" (1). Silence is thus both an "imaginary state" and that which makes possible music (narrative in sound). As we will see, silence's relationship to music is very much like zero's relationship to

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<sup>5</sup> "When one adds up 4 minutes and 33 seconds, the sum is 273 seconds. Translated into negative degrees of temperature, this happens to be absolute zero on the Kelvin scale (actually  $-273.2^{\circ}\text{C}$ ). As substances approach that temperature, molecular motion ceases and they begin to exhibit peculiar properties. Although Cage heard sounds in an anechoic chamber and concluded that silence does not exist, his silent prayer of 273 seconds is a metaphor for a physical state in which matter is maximally ordered, vibratory activity is stilled, and silence is, in principle absolute" (Clarkson 72).

mathematics, and like nothing's relationship to being. In all three instances, silence, zero, and nothing are each considered impossible or imaginary states when isolated from all other factors, yet they are necessary to the condition and conditioning of those other factors, be they sound, numbers, or being. Silence, like zero and the nothing it signifies, *is a fiction of an original and absolute blankness* – a fiction that renders possible and comprehensible the world.

In twentieth-century visual arts, too, we find a preoccupation with representing nothing. The Russian painter Kazimir Malevich, founder of the avant-garde Suprematist movement, is one of the earliest of such artists whose visual work attempts to depict nothing itself. In what has since been dubbed the Suprematist manifesto, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism" (1915), Malevich claims, "I have transformed myself *in the zero of form*" (118, emphasis in the original). Two years earlier, he had painted his famous *Black Square* (1913): a painting featuring a black square on a white backdrop. Malevich himself wrote extensively on this painting, its depiction of emotion as the only true reality, and everything else a void:

When, in the year 1913, in my desperate attempt to free art from the ballast of objectivity, I took refuge in the square form and exhibited a picture which consisted of nothing more than a black square on a white field, the critics and, along with them, the public sighed, "Everything which we loved is lost. We are in a kind of desert ... Before us is nothing but a black square on a white background!" [...] The black square on the white field was the first form in which nonobjective feeling came to be expressed. The square = feeling, the white field = the void beyond this feeling. Yet the general public saw in the nonobjectivity of the representation the demise of art and failed to grasp the evident fact that feeling here had assumed external form. ("Suprematism," 544, 546)

It should be noted that Malevich first exhibited *Black Square* in the “red (beautiful) corner” of the room – the place traditionally reserved for icons in Russian households. Such an ironic positioning – a painting of pure geometric forms that attempts to be free of social or cultural meaning displayed in the domestic place of religious worship – offers up at least two possible meanings: a nihilistic rejection of any and all meaning (the public’s reaction to the painting), or, on the contrary, a depiction of a new sacred meaning found in meaninglessness itself (Malevich’s intention).

In a similar development, abstract expressionism of post-WWII gradually reduces painterly apparatuses (e.g. subject, figure, dimension, line, space, color), in some instances resulting in monochrome paintings – which many perceive as either verging on nothing, or as representing nothingness itself. We have Ad Reinhardt’s black paintings, Yves Klein’s blue monochromes, Robert Rauschenberg’s white canvases, and Mark Rothko’s monochrome paintings that succeed, according to one critic, in obliterating “differences between form, background, and even the paintings themselves [...], render[ing] visibility unnecessary, as there is nothing to see” (Kosoi 26).<sup>6</sup> Such general evaluation of monochrome paintings – that they are on the edge of nothing, brought to nothing’s lip by an increasing diminishment of painting’s stylistic elements – considers nothing as the cumulative negation of something (an idea similar to Sartre’s concept of nothingness, which I discuss in “Chapter One”). But other critics find in these pieces visualizations of nothingness itself, not just nothing’s edge: as Rothko himself told Werner

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<sup>6</sup> See James E. B. Breslin: “Rothko’s artistic enterprise was, after all, a something that was dangerously close to nothing” (7). Robert Roseblum: Rothko’s paintings are “images of something near to nothingness” (10). See also Barbara Novak and Brian O’Doherty’s “Rothko’s Dark Paintings: Tragedy and Void” (1998), and Natalie Kosoi’s “Nothingness Made Visible: The Case of Rothko’s Paintings” (2005).

Haftmann, he wished his paintings to “cover up something similar to this ‘nothingness.’”<sup>7</sup> Commenting on this aspect of Rothko’s paintings, Natalie Kosoi writes, “Rothko’s paintings are masks indeed, but masks that show what they hide: that it is nothingness that lies behind them. This nothingness, which Rothko’s paintings conjure up, is not only a negation and an absence but also what designates the limit of human experience, and as such, it is also what defines and constitutes it” (31). Kosoi’s reading of Rothko’s paintings takes a page from Heidegger’s ideas about nothing and its relationship to being; she argues that Rothko captures in his paintings the sense of existential anxiety experienced when one is brought face-to-face with the nothing that is essential to our beings. Additionally, this notion of a mask concealing nothing is a tenet of Russian conceptualism and *sots-art* of the seventies and eighties (which I will discuss at length in “Chapter Five”), and is also a driving idea behind much of Andy Warhol’s work, who describes his art in a similar manner: “If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There’s nothing behind it” (“Andy Warhol: My True Story” 90). Many characterize Warhol’s best work as based on a fixation with nothingness itself, and sometimes on an acute fear of the void.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, when asked why he decided to paint the Campbell’s soup can, Warhol replied, “I wanted to paint nothing. I was looking for something that was the essence of nothing, and that was it.”<sup>9</sup> Or, as he writes in *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* (1975),

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Anna C. Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989. 193.

<sup>8</sup> See Stephen Koch’s *Stargazer: The Life, World, and Films of Andy Warhol* (1991), and Gary Indiana’s *Andy Warhol and the Can that Sold the World* (2010).

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Victor Brockris’ *Warhol – The Biography: 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2003. 154.

“I’m sure I’m going to look in the mirror and see nothing. People are always calling me a mirror and if a mirror looks into a mirror, what is there to see? [...] Some critic called me the Nothingness Himself and that didn’t help my sense of existence any. Then I realized that existence itself is nothing and I felt better. But I’m still obsessed with the idea of looking into the mirror and seeing no one, nothing” (7).

In the case of Klein, he considered his blue monochromes to function as analogues of the void, a notion he substantiated with the phenomenological writings of Gaston Bachelard. In a 1959 lecture “The Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial” delivered at the Sorbonne in Paris, Klein directly addressed these ideas:

To the question which is often asked me – why did you choose blue? – I will reply by borrowing yet again from Gaston Bachelard that marvelous passage concerning blue from his book *Air and Dreams*. [...] “First there is nothing, next there is a depth of nothingness, then a profundity of blue.” Blue has no dimensions, it is beyond dimensions, whereas other colors are not. (819)

His blue monochromes later on inspired the creation of his exhibit featuring ‘invisible’ paintings in a bare room, save for a large empty cabinet. Commented Klein on this project, “My paintings are now invisible and I would like to show them in a clear and positive manner, in my next Parisian exhibition at Iris Clert’s.”<sup>10</sup> This exhibition was dubbed *The Void* (1958), and generated such public interest that thousands of people queued up to see nothing itself (not unlike the emperor’s new clothes?!). After this famous show, Klein continued to present voids in various forms. *Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility* (1959-1962), for example, involved the sale of invisible paintings and empty space, ritualized by the exchange of gold for a check that documented the ownership of the ‘immaterial zone.’ Klein’s 1960 photomontage *Leap Into The*

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Sidra Stich, *Yves Klein*. London: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 1995. 133.

*Void* depicts the artist in the act of falling off a wall, arms outspread. His 1962 *Victory of Samothrace* consists of a plaster cast of *Winged Victory* (c. 190 BCE), which he painted his characteristic blue, thereby synthesizing the statue's famous incompleteness that suggests a structured absence with Klein's dimensionless and void-evoking blue.

Much of twentieth century cultural, linguistic, literary, and psychoanalytical theory deals explicitly with nothing – with various kinds of narrative holes and psychic voids, oppositional zeros, lacunae – as part of their methodologies and/or philosophies. In “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), for instance, Sigmund Freud defines melancholia as a psychic state in which the ego has voided itself, has transferred its mourning for the loss of another into an internal loss of the self, thereby formulating the self into a kind of nothing: “In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (246). For Freud, the voided ego undermines the healthy organization of the psyche, and is therefore something to be treated and hopefully cured. However, other fields discover figurations of nothing to be catalysts for creation and meaning, and not necessarily something to be cured or avoided – despite nothing's seemingly constant ability to obliterate whatever system it contacts. For example, in the field of linguistics Roland Barthes and others explore the so-called “zero degree,” which threatens the most fundamental foundations of structural linguistics. In the tradition of structural linguistics, meaning arises from difference: “good” takes its meaning from an oppositional relationship with “bad,” “man” from “woman,” “light” from “dark,” and so on. However, Barthes demonstrates how meaning can also be created “out of nothing,” via an opposition with an absence of any characteristic or quality. Writes Barthes (building upon the work of Ferdinand de Saussure): “We have here a pure differential state; the zero degree testifies to the power held by any system of signs, of creating meaning ‘out of nothing’: ‘the language can

be content with an opposition of something and nothing” (77). This notion of the zero degree challenges the basic tenets of structural linguistics, demonstrating that the functioning of binary oppositions is not essential to the creation of meaning, but that meaning can be generated via nothing.

In a somewhat reverse position, Maurice Blanchot examines zero not as a generative source of meaning or language, but instead as the ultimate aim of discourse, knowledge, and literature. For instance, in “Man at Point Zero” (1971), a review essay of Claude Levi-Strauss’ *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), Blanchot defines the ethnographer’s study as the quest for “man at point zero”; that is, ethnography is the search for man’s origins, for bare, unaccommodated man. This search for point-zero man always ends in failure, according to Blanchot, who rejects the notion of an origin. It is impossible to get to man’s zero-point, firstly because the ethnographer destroys the unspoiled/untouched/original nature of whatever he studies by virtue of coming into contact with it, and secondly because origins do not exist. What Blanchot is interested in, however, is our fascination with origins in the first place, our desire for “man at point zero” at all. He attributes this desire for the zero-point – the chimerical origin – as oriented not so much on the past as on the future: that is, we desire to be made anew, to refresh ourselves, to cleanse society of any and all false myths and ideologies, and in so doing to spiritually and culturally start again, at zero. This desire to be rid of ideological dictates and tradition’s trappings is also, Blanchot argues, the true aim of the real writer. In an earlier essay, “The Search for Point Zero” (1959), Blanchot puts forward the idea that literature only begins to approach itself (that is, actually *become* literature) when it rejects any and all conventions imposed upon it, and refuses dictates regarding the true form and goals of literature. Only when literature is liberated from these conventions and aesthetic manifestos can the writer, at last, have the freedom to really

write. However, at this point Blanchot's own dictate comes in: he argues that the liberated writer will devote himself to the "zero point," that is, the point of literature when even writing is dispensed with, as an act of destroying the temple of writing that makes sacred this very action and the written word. That is, writing itself is literature's final convention, which the writer must break free of if he is to truly write. The true writer, therefore, will ultimately turn to silence. Says Blanchot:

To write is first of all to want to destroy the temple before building it; it is at least, before passing over its threshold, to question the constraints of such a place, the original sin that formed the decision to enclose ourselves in it. To write is finally to refuse to pass over the threshold, to refuse to "write." [...] To write without "writing," to bring literature to that point of absence where it disappears, where we no longer have to dread its secrets, which are lies, that is "the degree zero of writing," the neutrality that every writer seeks, deliberately or without realizing it, and which leads some of them to silence. (206, 207)

The true writer will reject, eventually, even language and the act of writing, for neither are actually in his control, or represent his own language. He will refuse to write, as his truest written act: writes Blanchot in *The Space of Literature* (1955), "The poet is he who hears a language which makes nothing heard" (51).

Reader Response theory presents another approach to literature that is concerned with its relationship to textual nothings and/or zero. In general, this approach highlights the gaps that are inherent in language, and the vacancies that are present in all narratives. Such gaps and vacancies, on the one hand, demonstrate how language and narrative are always incomplete, can never fully say what anything really is; as William Faulkner's Addie laments, "I learned that words are no good; that words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at" (171). On the

other hand, these gaps and vacancies depend upon the reader to supply whatever is missing; as Wolfgang Iser argues in *The Implied Reader* (1974), these gaps and vacancies are necessary to any narrative, for they render the reader an active participant in the text, thereby making more meaningful the reader's experience. In other words, the gaps and vacancies call upon the reader to make meaning; nothing, once again, is seen to be the catalyst for creation. It is interesting to note that in recent years, Iser has focused his research on zero as the origin of language; in his essay "Authoriality: The Zero Point of Discourse" (2003), he employs the mathematical zero as the signifier of "the authorial instance," which produces the literary or philosophical text. What began in the seventies as an exploration of the gaps inherent in language has become in the twenty-first century a theory of zero's conditioning of language itself: nothing is not merely a part of language, it is now a prerequisite for language to be.

Finally, in the literary world (which, of course, is the main focus of this present study), many twentieth- and twenty-first-century novels, short stories, plays, and poems make their subject that of nothing itself, or attempt to give narrative form to nothing. The work of Henry James is considered by many to be preoccupied with nothing, and often places this nothing center stage in the form of main characters who never make appearances, obsessions with loss that transform into shrines to nothingness, and the psychological and supernatural effects of nothingness. For example, Rolland Monroe argues that the protagonist of *The Ambassadors* (1903), Mrs. Newsome, who spurs the narrative thread of the novel, nevertheless appears not a single time in the book: "she is made present only through the thought and action of her ambassadors" (101). From this perspective, the novel demonstrates nothing's conditioning of narrative. In "The History of 0" (2004), J. Hillis Miller, as many before him, reads "The Altar of

the Dead” (1895) as an “allegory of one avatar of the zero, death” (132).<sup>11</sup> In that same article, Miller discusses the works of James Joyce and George Elliot as literature “in which the zero functions in a truly rhetorical way” (129). Works such as Italo Svevo’s *Confessions of Zeno* (1923) and Jorge Luis Borges’ “Avatars of the Tortoise” (1932) play with Zeno’s paradoxes and thematically explore zero. In “Borges: Between Zero and Infinity” (2007), Floyd Merrell analyzes how Borges’ narratives illustrate zero’s role in the construction of infinite time and space – nothing itself resides at the heart of the Borgesian labyrinth. Thomas Pynchon’s work also derives many of its main themes from mathematical concepts and paradoxes, and many scholars consider his recurring theme of entropy in relation to zero – as a magnetic point toward which all existence strives and goes.<sup>12</sup> In Donald Bartheleme’s “Nothing: A Preliminary Account” (1973), the author strives to arrive at an explanation of what nothing is by listing everything nothing is not. Such a task, he quickly realizes, is impossible, no matter how encyclopedic the list of “nothing is not” is: he admits, “Nothing is what keeps us waiting (forever)” (241). However, Bartheleme goes on to celebrate this failure to write nothing, as it keeps before one the promise of meaning: “How joyous the notion that, try as we may, we cannot do other than fail and fail absolutely and that the task will always remain before us, like a meaning for our lives. Hurry. Quickly. Nothing is not a nail” (242). Nothing is not a *nailed-down* phenomenon, but something whose very un-nailed-down-ness enables the proliferation of infinite phenomena, promises endless potential meaning. A similar take on nothing is found in the fiction of Paul Auster. In “Nothing to Go on: Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*” (1997), author

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<sup>11</sup> See also Sigi Jöttkandt’s “Lighting a Candle to Infinity: ‘The Altar of the Dead’” (2003), and Andrzej Warminkski’s “Reading Over Endless Histories: Henry James’ ‘Altar of the Dead’” (1988).

<sup>12</sup> See Alan J. Freidman and Manfred Puetz’s “Science as Metaphor: Thomas Pynchon and *Gravity’s Rainbow*” (1974), and David Seed’s “Order in Thomas Pynchon’s ‘Entropy’” (1981).

Paul Auster and literary critic William G. Little discuss Auster's narratives as detective stories in which nothing, quite literally, is discovered. On the one hand, Auster's refiguring of the detective story as that which uncovers no knowledge, accompanied by his private eye (or, private "I") who tracks down nothing, demonstrates that any narrative that attempts to depict experience as wholly coherent is misleading; the discovery of nothing via the detective story is a way of deconstructing these traditional narratives that claim to arrive at a unified and entire truth. On the other hand, Auster also depicts nothing as abundantly plentiful by virtue of its total open-endedness, not unlike the incomplete grotesque body described by Mikhail Bakhtin:

Language with nothing to it is analogous to the grotesque body of the carnival participant. Marked by levity, it freely admits its own incompleteness, open-endedness, and wastefulness. Like the bulging, gaping body of the Rabelaisian reveler, the language of nothing is irreducibly meaty. (139-140)

While his stories discover nothing, thereby destabilizing narrative forms that promise coherent meanings and stable truths, this nothing is puckered with infinite potential meanings. There may not be a single universal and transcendental truth, but there are infinite truths to be had, made possible by nothing. I would add to this modest yet meaty sampling of writers who write about nothing additional representatives from the twentieth century such as Joseph Brodsky,<sup>13</sup> Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky,<sup>14</sup> David Markson, and Cormac McCarthy, while acknowledging their predecessors such as Gustave Flaubert,<sup>15</sup> and William Shakespeare. Ultimately, from the

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<sup>13</sup> See Joseph Brodsky's *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (1986).

<sup>14</sup> Krzhizhanovsky is known for writing about nonexistences populating a nonexistent country after the Russian Revolution; as he said about himself, "I am a crossed-out person" (quoted in Joanne Turnbull's "Introduction" to *Memories of the Future* [2009, x]).

<sup>15</sup> Flaubert famously wrote to Louise Colet, describing his ambition to write a book "about nothing." See Marilyn Brooks' *Madame Bovary: A Novel About Nothing* (2001).

modern loss of tradition to the postmodern loss of grand narratives, nothing has become an increasingly dominant motif in the cultural landscape of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

## **II. Narratives of Nothing**

The following study begins with a survey of the main theories regarding nothing and its signifiers (e.g. zero), which lays the foundation for the main literary analyses to come. “Chapter One” divides this theoretical survey into three parts: (1) the development of zero in mathematics; (2) nothing’s relationship to being; and (3) nothing’s relationship to narrative. Zero appears as a recurring problem in the history of mathematics, and recently, explorations into the mathematical zero have seemingly reached a climax. Zero itself functions as a kind of paradox: it is both a number and not a number, and generates the full plane of numbers while remaining outside of the very system it generates. As such, zero’s relationship to the system of numbers shares striking similarities with nothing’s relationship to being and narrative. Regarding nothing’s relationship to being, Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre each position nothing as inseparable from the human condition, as an essential producer of knowable and meaningful existence. Heidegger argues that the question concerning nothing is the ultimate metaphysical inquiry, and that, in turn, it is nothing itself that makes the very act of questioning possible, which accordingly enables being that is aware of itself, or *Dasein*. In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre questions what it is about man’s condition that allows him to consider nothing itself: “What we have been trying to define is the being of man insofar as he conditions the appearance of nothingness” (25). Sartre designates man’s essential freedom as that which allows nothingness to come into the world; nothingness, otherwise, does not exist – it is exclusive to man’s experience, a condition of man.

The present study adopts a similar position concerning nothing and its essential relationship to human experience and being, but adds a third element: that of language and perception (in general), and of writing narrative/fiction (in particular). That is, I perceive in the literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries an increasing association of nothing with the enabling of human experience (or of nothing's dependence upon human consciousness), and an association of nothing with the creation of narrative itself. This relationship between nothing and narrative is, I argue, established in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, Mikhail Bakhtin, Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva, each of whom consider nothing to be inseparable from perception, language, narrative, and meaning. As Heidegger and Sartre position nothing as essential to the creation of being, so Nietzsche, Bakhtin, Derrida, and Kristeva figure nothing as essential to the production of narrative. The parallels between their theories regarding nothing and being, and nothing and narrative, are particularly telling, especially as the twentieth century deconstructs our notions of reality and fiction, rendering these increasingly indistinguishable from one another. By the twenty-first century, philosophical inquiries into the relationship between being and nothing must also take into account the relationship between narrative/fiction and nothing – if reality and fiction are becoming evermore intertwined.

“Chapter Two” presents a comparative analysis of Nikolai Gogol’s “The Overcoat” and Herman Melville’s “Bartleby” as prototypical narratives of nothing. This preliminary discussion sets the stage for the main event: analyses of the work of Vladimir Nabokov (“Chapter Three”), Samuel Beckett (“Chapter Four”), and Victor Pelevin (“Chapter Five”) as literature that not only gives narrative form to nothing itself (narratives *about* nothing), but that also envisions nothing as a generator of narrative (narratives *of* nothing), and additionally as the metaphysical functioning that enables being to exist. My phrase *narratives of nothing* indicates the symbiotic

relationship between nothingness and writing, wherein nothingness resides at the forever-deferring center of a semiotic system that produces writing, narrative fiction, and thus “reality” as we know it. In each of the texts I have selected, there is a clear relationship established between (1) the act of writing, producing narrative and/or meaning, and (2) nothing or one of its many signifiers (e.g. void, cipher, zero, etc.). As such, these texts are concerned with the role of writing and narrative in our lives, and moreover with how nothing is related and even essential to the act of composing narrative. Additionally, many of these texts position words as inseparable from the world, or even as that which allow the world to be brought into knowable being; as Nabokov, for example, tells us in *Speak, Memory* (1962), *Homo poeticus* exists first to allow for *Homo sapiens* to come into existence. This indicates that nothing is perceived not only as the catalyst for language, but also (as Heidegger would claim) the catalyst for being, since words are inextricably and immanently tied up with the world – as depicted in many of these texts.

“Chapter Three” features the work of Nabokov, whose writings consistently present reality as a proxy of fiction, or, as Nabokov himself was fond of writing, “reality” in quotation marks. Reality stripped of its quotation marks – or, the Real laid bare – is repeatedly depicted as nothing itself or a blankness of being (e.g. absent, disappearing, or non-existing characters; naughts, voids, abysses). But this reality that is nothingness functions as the catalyzing element in a meaning-making system that generates infinite “realities” – our meaningful and experiential worlds. In other words, nothing itself allows for interpretation and fictionalization to occur; nothing is the essential mechanic of interpretation and fiction-making, thereby producing any and all meaningful existence. As we will see, nothing is at the very core of Nabokov’s characteristic patterning that enables and generates meaning and, thus, “reality.”

In “Chapter Four,” I turn to Beckett’s narratives, which attempt to arrive at being laid bare through narrative laid bare – again, we find a symbiotic relationship between the word and the world; being and language go hand-in-hand. As Beckett’s texts gradually pare down narrative through an “aesthetics of lessness,” emptying themselves of literary conventions such as plot, character, temporality, and setting in an attempt to express all that has previously been said in the most reduced form, they more and more seek an immanent nothingness that paradoxically encompasses infinite being. This immanent nothingness that Beckettian narrative courts is pierced through with a language all its own, therefore suggesting that even the barest of being – or, nonbeing – cannot rid itself of language. In Beckett’s world, language is part and parcel of immanent nothingness, in which all being (human, animal, animate, inanimate, vegetable, mineral) participates. Nothingness, therefore, is at the heart of being and at the core of language: it generates both, which are proxies of one another.

“Chapter Five” examines the work of the post-Soviet author Victor Pelevin, whose main theme is considered by many to be the voided nature of post-Soviet Russian culture and society. On the one hand, Pelevin depicts the void in nihilistic overtones, demonstrating how post-Soviet culture reveals the emptiness and meaninglessness of its preceding Soviet culture, and is itself a giant void unable to overcome the loss of meaning. Likewise, with the influx of capitalism, literature has also become obsolete and emptied of meaning. Pelevin demonstrates literature’s degraded status by writing novels that function as non-novels, or that refuse to be literature and instead position themselves as consumer goods (e.g. *Generation “IT”* [1999]). On the other hand, Pelevin also explores the positive aspects of the void, signifying that nothing is not only the crisis of post-Soviet culture, but also, perhaps, the very means to transcendence of that crisis. Consciousness of the void becomes a method for manipulating and generating new realities and

meanings, and also enables the revitalization of literature. As we will see, many of Pelevin's characters are poets and writers themselves, or are modeled after famous literary characters, thereby taking their existence from fiction. Their struggles with the void, their failures and successes, represent the writer's grappling with the void – and how the void is both the crisis of post-Soviet culture and literature, and its salvation.

In these writings, nothing and its signifiers function much like the mathematical zero, which enables the full spectrum of numbers while excusing itself from the system. Likewise, nothing functions as the catalyzing element that produces both narrative and existence, but itself remains outside those systems of language and being. That is, nothing generates narrative and being, but is itself difficult, if not impossible, to capture in words or to experience in existence. It operates, in other words, as an imaginary and impossible abstraction whose paradoxical function is precisely to allow for existing and possible narratives and being. In each of these chapters, we will witness how these authors explore this paradoxical functioning of nothing while attempting to write into their narratives nothing itself, which naturally eschews narrative's form, not to mention experience's sensors. These authors attempt to give narrative form to nothing, while acknowledging the contradiction inherent in doing so. They write *narratives of nothing*, exhibiting how nothing produces systems of words and worlds, but is itself not reproducible or capable of being represented in these systems – when we look for nothing in these systems, we find, of course, that it is not there.

## **Chapter One Theorizing Nothing**

### **I. Mathematical Foundations: Zero**

While this study is concerned with nothing and its relationship to narrative and the construction of meaning rather than mathematical theories, the explorations into zero undertaken by mathematics are valuable to my analysis. In a study about the relationship between nothing, narrative, and being, and how twentieth-century arts and philosophy are increasingly preoccupied with nothing, it is imperative to acknowledge similar ideas that develop in the “hard sciences” during this time. To this end, I turn to a sketch of the complicated and controversial history of the number/not-number zero. Throughout this sketch, I draw comparisons between these mathematical zeros and philosophical conceptions of nothing.

In the course of my research, I have come across many, sometimes-contradictory historical narratives about the origin of zero. On the one hand, this is no surprise: history, after all, is no stranger to inconsistent accounts. Furthermore, it often happens that the same concept is invented independently at various times and in various places – and only later reified into a singular phenomenon. On the other hand, these contradictory accounts concerning the origins of zero may indicate something about the nature of zero itself: that is, its historical origin, like zero, is an indeterminate, always-slipping paradox. Indeed, various hesitations concerning zero, and conundrums inherent in zero and its functions, have shaped zero’s history: its drawn-out acceptance into the folds of many societies, and its occasional banishment from certain civilizations. As such, the history of man’s relationship with zero tells us much about the paradoxical nature of zero itself, and man’s inability to master this notion (not unlike the historian’s inability to firmly nail down zero’s origin).

In *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero* (1987), Brian Rotman gives a preliminary account of zero's history that later scholars further flesh out. He asserts that our familiar zero (0) originated in seventh-century central India, was prevalent in the Arab world by the tenth century, and was largely resisted by Europe until the fourteenth century, when the handling of numbers passed from the church (which, till that time, utilized the Roman numeral system that lacks a zero) to the merchant class (8). Rotman concedes that comparable versions of the Hindu zero were invented prior to the seventh century, notably by Babylonian mathematicians of the Hellenistic period and by pre-Columbian Mayans, but emphasizes that any zero equivalent “was unknown either to the Romans or the classical Greeks” (2). Having acknowledged but neglected to fully describe either the Babylonian or the Mayan zero, he focuses his attention on the Hindu zero, arguing that it was ultimately established in Europe due to the influence of mercantile capitalism:

The central role occupied by double-entry book-keeping (principle of zero balance) and the calculational demands of capitalism broke down any remaining resistance to the “infidel symbol” of zero, and ensured that by the early seventeenth century Hindu numerals had completely replaced Roman ones as the dominant mode of recording and manipulating numbers throughout Europe. (8)

This relationship between the emergence of capitalism and the coinciding adoption of zero in Europe foreshadows, and perhaps influences, the development of imaginary money in economic exchange – ignites the shift from gold coinage to the use of imaginary bank money. As Rotman argues, the introduction of the zero into a code of numbers is an introduction of a meta-sign into a system of signs; likewise, imaginary money is another such meta-sign, a sign about signs, “whose meaning is to indicate [...] the absence of certain other signs” (1). This theory that zero

was finally established in Europe due to the demands of mercantile capitalism, coupled with the later capitalist development of imaginary money, suggests that the employment of a special sign that signifies nothing is *essential* to capitalism's workings – this idea will be further developed throughout the course of this study, especially in my analysis of Victor Pelevin's post-Soviet novels ("Chapter Five"). Finally, Rotman also draws parallels between the introduction of zero into mathematics and the development of the vanishing point in perspective art.

More than ten years after Rotman's *Signifying Nothing*, three separate books about the history and concept of zero were published between 1999 and 2000 (perhaps due to the mania surrounding the apocalyptic zero of Y2K?): Robert Kaplan's *The Nothing That Is: A Natural History of Zero* (1999), Charles Seife's *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea* (2000), and John D. Barrow's *The Book of Nothing: Vacuums, Voids, and the Latest Ideas About the Origins of the Universe* (2000). These three studies give fairly similar accounts of zero's origin and development, but differ in some important ways. All three discuss zero's earliest developments in Hellenistic Babylon (𐎠), pre-Columbian Mayan civilization (0), and ninth-century India (• or O); Kaplan makes an additional argument for the possible appearance of zero in Alexandrian Greece (O). These scholars also differ in their accounts of the origin of the Indian zero, which was ultimately adopted by the Arabs and evolved into our present-day zero: Kaplan and Seife argue that its origins can be traced back through Greece to Babylon, while Barrow holds that Indian mathematicians invented zero on their own, not unlike the Mayans.<sup>16</sup>

In any case, all three accounts credit the Babylonians with the earliest development – between the sixth and third centuries BCE – of a sign that would serve as a placeholder, indicating absence of number, in their positional system of numbering (Kaplan 12; Seife 15;

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<sup>16</sup> The Mayan zero is an interesting cul-de-sac in the history of the mathematical zero, but will not be dealt with at length in the present study. For a discussion of the Mayan zero, see Barrow 27-32, Kaplan 80-89, and Seife 16-18.

Barrow 26-27). This sign, often composed of two parallel slanted wedges ( $\text{𐎶}$ ), indicated “nothing in this column,” and was not considered to be a number: “[The Babylonian zero] did little more than make sure digits fell in the right places; it didn’t really have a numerical value of its own [...] On its own, it meant ... nothing” (Seife 15). Barrow also emphasizes that this Babylonian zero was quite different from our own, and signified nothing besides an empty space in an accounting register: “Their zero sign was never written as the answer to a sum like  $6 - 6$ . It was never used to express an endpoint of operation where nothing remains. [...] Nor did the Babylonian zero find itself entwined with metaphysical notions of nothingness” (27). It is perhaps best to think of the Babylonian zero more as a kind of punctuation mark – like a space or a period, something that clarifies the meaning of signs around it – and less as a number with a meaning of its own.

The presence of zero in ancient Greece is highly debated, and most scholars agree that the Greeks had no sign or concept for zero. Kaplan, Seife, and Barrow each explore the curiosity of zero’s lacuna in classical Greece – the phenomenon wherein a people can readily make puns about nothing (see the episode of Odysseus in the Cyclops’ cave), but apparently do not think to create a numerical nothing. In fact, this situation wherein the *idea* of nothing is prevalent but the *mathematical* nothing (zero) does not exist is not exclusive to Greek history, but is a common occurrence in many civilizations. Kaplan argues that it was not until Alexandrian times when Greece encountered any semblance of zero – when they invaded the Babylonian empire. However, it is not the slanted wedges we find thereafter on their papyri, but the symbol O – where did this O come from, and moreover, what did it mean? The actual meaning of this O is under debate. The common yet controversial explanation, Kaplan tells us, “is that ‘O’ came from the Greek omicron, the first letter of οὐδέν, ouden: ‘nothing,’ like Odysseus’ [diminutive] name

Οὐτίς; or simply from οὐχ, ‘not’: like our naught” (18). This O may have indicated absence of any kind of measure (e.g. degrees, minutes), but clearly was not considered to be a number in its own right – again, utilized more as a punctuation mark. Further compounding the debate concerning this O’s meaning is the fact that it hardly appears outside of the Greek’s astronomical writings. Greek astronomers may have done their calculations using Babylonian notation, but they would then convert their numbers back into Greek numerals, without zero (Seife 39). In short, zero was largely absent – if not completely absent – from ancient Greece. The question then becomes: why did the Greeks reject zero, or what prevented them from developing it?

Both Seife and Barrow point to Aristotelian philosophy and its dismissal of infinity and the void for the Greeks’ rejection of zero, and later, for Christian Europe’s longstanding hesitation to adopt zero. According to Seife, “The [Aristotelian] universe was contained in a nutshell, ensconced comfortably within the sphere of fixed stars; the cosmos was finite in extent, and entirely filled with matter. There was no infinite; there was no void. There was no infinity; there was no zero” (46). Barrow makes a similar argument: “Aristotle’s picture of Nature was extremely influential and his views about the vacuum fashioned the consensus view about it until the Renaissance. He rejected the possibility that a vacuum could exist” (64). Whether or not these scholars are correct concerning Aristotle’s impact on zero’s laggard development in the West, the interesting implication of hypotheses such as these is that a culture’s dominant philosophy or self-defining condition affects what are its supposedly objective epistemological spheres – that is, mathematics and science. A culture’s given relationship to a concept such as zero tells us a great deal about the culture itself; thus, zero’s status in a given culture becomes a reflection or symptom of that culture’s condition. The story, then, about zero’s development and

meaning is just as much about philosophical and cultural shifts as it is about mathematical theorems.

This ambiguous O appeared in India by the ninth century, possibly via routes of commerce from Alexandria (Kaplan 37; Seife 63), or as an isolated Indian invention (Barrow 32). At the same time, another sign – a solid dot • – punctuated Indian texts, serving variously to signify something missing or absent, to act almost as zeros do in positional notation. For example, dots could stand as a promise to complete an owed task, or as a lacuna in an inscription, “the dot marking a blank” (Kaplan 55), not unlike our ellipses. These dots function similarly to dots found in the Torah that are placed over and under words or letters; some scholars suggest they are “intended to make it seem that the word had not been written – rather like assigning it the value zero, or taking it off the board” (Kaplan 54). Moving away from the meaning of these dots in relation to words and into the realm of numbers, we find they functioned to signify the place-value of the numeral to which they were attached. As such, the zero-symbol at this time still does not function as a number (or a letter), but instead as a modifier or a separator.

Eventually, however, the dot was used to designate an unknown variable, in the same way we use  $x$  in algebraic equations. This function of signifying the unknown figure rendered the dot a kind of receptive vacancy – or a symbol of the Indian ‘Śūnya’: “‘Śūnya’ isn’t so much vacancy [...] as receptivity, a womb-like hollow ready to swell – and indeed it comes from the root śvi, meaning swelling” (Kaplan 59). The dot therefore signifies a space of infinite potentiality, in addition to an absence of number or meaning; it stands for nothing *and* infinite possible somethings, much like the later term “cipher,” which simultaneously means zero and the secret message or code. It also is worth mentioning that this dot signifying a receptive vacancy is

similar to Plato's notion of *khôra*. *Khôra* – space ready to be filled – is one of three essential components of the cosmos (the other two, being and becoming). Writes Plato, “Third is Space, which is everlasting, not admitting destruction; providing a situation for all things that come into being, but itself apprehended without the senses by a sort of bastard reasoning, and hardly an object of belief” (192). As we will see, this notion of a nothing that is also abundantly plentiful, or that designates a field of potentiality necessary for being to come into existence, will not only inform its numerical counterpart zero, but will also dominate twentieth-century conceptions of nothing's relationship to being and narrative.

Ultimately, it is in India that the *notion* of zero begins to form – that is, what exactly the symbol for a numerical nothing will mean. Is the zero to only serve as a placeholder, indicating a lack of number, or will it be a number in its own right, a signifier of its own meaning? As Kaplan puts it,

[...] what is hanging in the balance here in India is the character this notion will take: will it be the idea of the absence of any number – or the idea of a number *for* such absence? Is it to be the mark of the empty, or the empty mark? The first keeps it estranged from numbers, merely part of the landscape through which they move; the second puts it on a par with them. (46)

Likewise, Seife argues, “Indian mathematicians did more than simply accept zero. They transformed it, changing its role from mere placeholder to number. This reincarnation was what gave zero its number” (66). There are two main theories regarding how and why zero dramatically transformed in India from a mere placeholder to a meaningful number. The first considers Indian culture's conceptions of nothingness and the void. Seife points out that long before zero entered Indian mathematics, nothingness was an intrinsic, varied, and sacred concept

in their culture: “Unlike Greece, India never had a fear of the infinite or of the void [...] The void had an important place in the Hindu religion” (64). In a similar vein, Barrow writes, “Whereas the Babylonian tradition had a one-dimensional approach to the zero symbol, seeing it simply as a sign for a vacant slot in an accountant’s register, the Indian mind saw it as part of a wider philosophical spectrum of meanings for nothingness and the void” (36). Indeed, one only has to examine the great number of Indian words that function as synonyms for zero to appreciate their rich conception of nothing. These words include many that relate to the sky (e.g. *abrhra*, atmosphere; *akâsha*, ether; *nabha*, sky/atmosphere; *vyoman*, sky/space), to holes or voids (e.g. *randhra*, hole; *sūnya*, void), or even to points (*bindu*, a point; *vindu* point). These last words for zero that connote the idea of a point – *bindu* and *vindu* – help us to understand why the dot (•) was employed by Indian mathematicians as both a zero placeholder and as an unknown quantity  $x$ , and signified a kind of abundant nothingness or infinite potentiality. As Barrow explains:

*Bindu* is used to describe the most insignificant geometrical object, a single point or a circle shrunk down to its center where it has no finite extent. Literally, it signifies just a “point,” but it symbolizes the essence of the Universe before it materialized into the solid world of appearances that we experience. It represents the uncreated Universe from which all things can be created. This creative potential was revealed by means of a simple analogy. For, by its motion, a single dot can generate lines, by whose motion can be generated planes, by whose motion can be generated all of three-dimensional space around us. The *bindu* was the Nothing from which everything could flow. (37)

As Indian conceptions of nothing were varied and rich (and not notions to be feared), it makes sense that they developed mathematical zeros that also became rich in meaning – connoting more

than just a mark signifying an empty space, but a number signifying a nothing that was abundantly plentiful, full of the potential  $x$ .

The second theory concerning zero's evolution in India from placeholder to meaningful number points to (1) Indian mathematicians' explorations into how zero functions with other numbers, and (2) the growing abstraction of numbers and of mathematics as a discipline. When Indian mathematicians, beginning around the ninth century, began to explore and describe just how zero behaves with other numbers, the gap between zero and numbers closed. Rules were made regarding the workings of zero, just as rules were previously made regarding the workings of other numbers. In short, treating zero like a number, and calculating with it as a number, turned it into a number. Moreover, as numbers themselves became more abstract and distinct from geometry – became less adjectives designating the quantity or measure of things and more nouns (things themselves) – it became easier to accept zero within the fold of numbers: “Unlike the Greeks, the Indians did not see squares in square numbers or the areas of rectangles when they multiplied two different values. Instead, they saw the interplay of numerals – numbers stripped of their geometric significance” (Seife 70). It is hard enough, for example, to visualize the dimensions for  $x^2$ , but how to visualize  $x^4$ ? Likewise, how to visualize any negative or irrational number? However, this visualization became less and less a hurdle to necessarily overcome as mathematics moved from the concrete and geometric world to the abstract. Writes Kaplan, “Like zero, numbers were becoming invisible: no longer descriptive of objects but objects – rarefied objects – themselves” (75). It therefore became easier to accept zero as a number itself as the mathematical field began to grapple with theoretical numbers, and not just with numbers that correspond to tangible and visible reality.

The Indian zero and the other Indian numerals were in Baghdad by the eighth century (Kaplan 90; Seife 71-72); these numbers would thereafter evolve into our familiar Arabic numerals. It was likely Arab merchants who brought zero with them to China (the Indian ancestry of the Chinese zero is widely acknowledged by scholars today [Kaplan 91]), and it was via Arab channels that zero came to Europe, along with other Arabic numerals, by 970. However, it was not until the fourteenth century that zero was widely accepted in Europe, and treated like an actual number – not merely as a sign among numbers. Like Rotman, Kaplan credits the fourteenth century’s burgeoning merchant class and rising tide of commerce with creating a social condition wherein zero became necessary for careful calculations and record keeping. Specifically, this need for accurate accounting led to the invention in Italy of double-entry bookkeeping, which calculates the difference between one’s credits and debits; if one’s accounts are balanced, this difference is zero. Thus, zero became “a balance-point between negative and positive amounts,” and “negative numbers [became] as real as their positive counterparts” (Kaplan 110). Zero finally, in other words, was given a stable place on the number line, before one and after negative one; it was established as an even number, and an integer in its own right. This reconsideration of zero and its relationship to positive and negative numbers establishes a new way of regarding one’s place in the world (in terms of transactions, affect, and effect), and lays the groundwork for new theories in physics: “Didn’t this new vocabulary lead in time to the framing in physics of its conservation laws: matter, momentum, energy neither created nor destroyed but exchanged – and to such insights as Newton’s Third Law of Motion: for every action there is equal and opposite reaction?” (Kaplan 110-111). It turns out that zero’s development as a number in the mathematical realm instigates concurrent reconsiderations of the nature of being and the functions of existence in both the human realm and the physical sphere.

Kaplan's historical account of the number zero demonstrates that it is just as much a symptom and signifier of its time as it is a mathematical concept.

Even as zero was accepted as a number with a value of its own, mathematicians were still troubled by its peculiar qualities. In particular, dividing by zero poses a real threat to the entire framework of mathematics: "Dividing by zero [...] allows you to prove, mathematically, anything at all in the universe" (Seife 23). It cannot be treated as any other number, for to do so undoes the number system. For example, dividing by zero can prove any equation, be it  $2=3$ ,  $0=100$ , or the Underground Man's  $2 \times 2=5$ . If these equations are mathematically true, then the entire system of mathematics goes up in smoke. Because of this, it eventually happens that zero enjoys a special status as both a number, and the marker of a number's absence. Mathematically, it functions to generate the full plane of numbers, *and* as a number itself. In other words, zero generates the system of numbers by standing outside of the system (that is, by functioning as something other than a number), *and* can function as a number within the system as well. Still, it can only function as a number within that system *sometimes*; whereas one may divide by any number, to divide by zero remains taboo.<sup>17</sup> Zero therefore also remains outside that system, even while generating that very system, and sometimes functioning as a part of it. It is similar, in this respect, to the structure's de-centered center that Derrida discusses in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences" (1970). Here, Derrida puts forward the notion of a deferring center that gives form to discursive structures. Like the zero in mathematics, the

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<sup>17</sup> Newton and Leibniz' calculus depended upon dividing by zero, even though they realized that dividing by zero could produce any desired value: as Seife puts it, "Nobody worried about dividing by zero when conveniently ignoring the rules of mathematics explained everything from the fall of an apple to the orbits of the planets in the sky. Though it gave the right answer, using calculus was as much an act of faith as declaring a belief in God" (126). Later, modern mathematicians sidestepped this problem by creating limits: "Instead of dividing by zero as Newton and Leibniz did, modern mathematicians divide by a number that they let approach zero. They do the division – perfectly legally, since there are no zeros – then they take the limit" (130).

unstructured center controls the meaning-making of its system, while remaining exempt from its own laws and functioning; this center is at once intrinsic and external to the system. As we will now see, zero also shares characteristics with twentieth-century philosophies regarding nothing's essential yet paradoxical relationship to being.

## **II. Theoretical Foundations: Nothing's Relationship to Being Heidegger and Sartre**

The philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre represent two of the twentieth century's leading inquiries into the concept of nothing and its relationship to being. In many ways, Sartre's and Heidegger's notions about nothing are at odds with one another, even though Sartre often draws from Heidegger's work. For Heidegger, nothing enables Dasein; that is, nothing itself grants beings their necessary finitude so that they may come to understand themselves in opposition to others, and is essential to all being – in fact, a prerequisite for any being to come into existence. In contrast, Sartre posits nothingness as that which does not have being, or, in short, nonbeing. Nonbeing cannot exist apart from being (as it is the negation of being), and is therefore dependent upon being. In short, Heidegger's nothing allows for being to come into existence, whereas Sartre's nothingness exists as the cumulative negation of being, as nonbeing derived from being. The former conceptualizes nothing as an essential cause of being, while the latter figures nothing as a derivative effect of being. As we will see, both Heidegger and Sartre associate nothing exclusively with the condition of man, and particularly with man's consciousness (Heidegger) and man's freedom (Sartre). In other words, both suggest, albeit in different ways, that nothing goes hand-in-hand with the human condition.

In the present section, I unpack their main theses to establish some evolving theoretical foundations for the literary analyses in the coming chapters. I designate these theoretical foundations as “evolving” namely because, as this study unfolds, they are amended, built upon,

and even challenged by the literary texts under investigation. Moreover, I employ these philosophies as a starting point, upon which I develop my own theories regarding the three-pronged relationship between nothing, being, and narrative. That is to say, I have not simply and uncritically adopted either Heidegger's or Sartre's ideas, nor straightforwardly employed their notions to generate a kind of analyzing-nothing decoder ring, but have read additional implications into their theories, thereby using their work to build my own theses. Additionally, while Heidegger's ideas on the subject were published before Sartre's, I find it beneficial to present Sartre's notions first as a counterpoint to Heidegger's, as my study places greater emphasis on Heidegger's nothing.

### ***Sartre and Nothingness***

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre questions the meaning of Heidegger's notion "being-in-the-world," then takes a step back to examine the often-unacknowledged functions that are inherent in any act of questioning. He finds that a "triple non-being conditions every question" (5). The first: we ask questions because we have "the non-being of knowing" (ibid); that is, we lack the answer in advance. The second: there exists the possibility that the reply to any question will be negative (e.g. there may be no knowledge available to supply an answer to the question). The third: all questions essentially imply the existence of a truth that limits the valid answers, a truth that always affirms, "It is this and not otherwise" (ibid). Thus, the very act of questioning is "encompassed with nothingness" (ibid), which compels Sartre to further consider the nature of nothingness. As the act of questioning is viewed as unique to man's condition, this investigation into nothingness is likewise an inquiry into the ontology of man – since non-being, as we have just seen, is triply integral to questioning.

Sartre begins his inquiry into nothingness by considering its relationship to negation. He first posits that negation is incapable of existing by itself, as it is related to “an act of judgment by which [one] should establish a comparison between the result anticipated and the result obtained” (6). Negation is part and parcel to psychic operations that perceive a discrepancy between the outcome anticipated and the outcome realized. In later passages, Sartre points out that negation is not only a quality of judgment, but is inherent in many of man’s ways of viewing the world; that is, man’s condition is such that he “must determine himself in the face of this possibility of non-being, either positively or negatively” (8). So, for example, man’s ability to recognize destruction, or to point a gun in a certain direction, or to conceive of fragility, each contains the possibility of non-being, a possibility that is dependent upon man’s perception. Destruction requires “a witness who can retain the past in some manner and compare it to the present in the form of *no longer*” (ibid), while the ability to point a gun at a particular target requires the *exclusion* of every other target, whereas to acknowledge a being as “fragile” indicates that one understands that particular being in relation to its potential *annihilation*. Sartre emphatically asserts that man’s role in this is essential: “It is necessary to recognize that destruction is an essentially human thing and that *it is man* who destroys his cities through the agency of earthquakes” (9). Negation, then, is not only unique to the condition of man, but is moreover an intrinsic part of his meaning-making mechanisms: e.g. asking questions, making judgments, conceptualizing truth, and perceiving the world as in flux, fleeting, fragile.

An interesting component of Sartre’s thought concerning nothingness is his designation of different levels or degrees of negation. In particular, his discussion of the “original nihilation” demonstrates how the very function of man’s perception is dependent upon negation – that we require blind spots, a negating vision that filters out the bulk of what we could possibly see in

order to see something as a meaningful and distinct entity. When we walk into a café looking for Pierre, all the other objects in the café synthesize into an undifferentiated ground against which one expects Pierre to appear. Their organization into a homogenous ground is an “original nihilation”: “For the ground is that which is seen only in addition, that which is the object of a purely marginal attention. Thus the original nihilation of all the figures which appear and are swallowed up in the total neutrality of a ground is the necessary condition for the appearance of the principle figure” (10). It seems to me that this notion of “original nihilation” harkens back to Nietzsche’s essay “On Truth and Lies In A Nonmoral Sense” (1873), wherein he puts forward his so-called “theory of perspectivism”: “[Men] are deeply immersed in illusions and in dream images; their eyes merely glide over the surface of things and see ‘forms’” (80). Nietzsche goes on to write, “It is only by means of forgetfulness that man can ever reach the point of fancying himself to possess a ‘truth’” (81), and “We obtain the concept, as we do the form, by overlooking what is individual and actual” (83). In other words, for man to be able to perceive a form, he must glide over everything that is not the form – he must nihilate. By virtue of “forgetting” and “overlooking” much of what he sees before him, he can perceive the “truth” and “form” of his attention’s desire. Our ability to bring into focus a particular form requires a nihilation of everything else from our focus – requires that it recede into what Sartre calls “an undifferentiated ground.” In both Nietzsche’s and Sartre’s musings on man’s perception, there is an essential nihilating aspect integral to the function of man’s vision. Of course, vision can be read as shorthand for the entire host of senses whereby man comprehends his world, creating intelligible forms and guiding truths. The important point is that a degree of nothingness is intrinsic to this process, if not the crucial factor that allows this meaning making to happen at all.

There are two main questions that are threaded throughout Sartre's discussion. The first, what is the relationship of being to nothingness? That is, are they equal and complementary oppositions, or does one precede the other (is one more original)? The second question is built upon Sartre's repeated observation that nothingness and negation are exclusive to man's experience, which leads him to inquire into the nature of man: in particular, he wants to know what is it about man that allows him to sense nothingness/negation in the first place.

Regarding the first question, Sartre rejects Hegel's opinion that being and nothingness comprise two equal yet contrary extremes, opposed to one another as thesis and antithesis. Instead, Sartre claims, "nonbeing is not the opposite of being; it is its contradiction. This implies that logically nothingness is subsequent to being since it is being, first posited, then denied" (14). He then specifies, "That does not mean only that we should refuse to put being and nonbeing on the same plane, but also that we must be careful never to posit nothingness as an original abyss from which being arose" (15). For Sartre, being not only precedes nothingness, but moreover does not need nothingness in order to be conceived; nothingness, conversely, lives a "borrowed existence, as it gets its being from being" (16). As we will see, Sartre's opinions on this matter are in direct opposition to Heidegger's, who envisions nothing as a crucial mechanic that enables being to exist.

Regarding the second question, Sartre phrases it as such: "Man is the being through whom nothingness comes to the world. But this question immediately provokes another: what must man be in his being in order that through him nothingness may come to being?" (24). Sartre's answer to this question is human freedom, which he designates as the very essence of man. What we know as "freedom," he argues, is absolutely impossible to separate from the condition of human reality: "Man does not exist first in order to be free subsequently; there is no

difference between the being of man and his being-free” (25). As long as we consider man, we consider a being who, by definition, has freedom according to his experience of reality. Freedom, for Sartre, is evidenced by man’s ability to detach himself from the world via, for instance, questioning and doubt. It is also evinced by man’s capacity to maintain simultaneously a prior consciousness and a present consciousness, which are separated by nothing itself: “the condition on which human reality can deny all or part of the world is that human reality carry nothingness within itself as the nothing which separates its present from all its past” (28). As humans, we fundamentally perceive that we have freedom, which is figured as the gap between our motives and our actions, between our past selves and our present selves; this gap is a nothing. Moreover, we retain a certain consciousness of our freedom that draws our attention to the ineffectiveness of our motives (e.g. there is no guarantee that our present self’s desires and resolutions for the future will actually be realized in the future – our future self may lack the will of our present self), so that our awareness of our essential freedom manifests a kind of anguish. This anguish as a manifestation of freedom signifies “that man is always separated by a nothingness from his essence” (35). So, it is our essential freedom that allows us to perceive nothingness, where nothingness is conceived as the gap between our past, present, and future selves, between our motives and our actions, and in the very functioning of our questions and our doubts.

It is these two notes that are most important this study: (1) that nothingness is exclusive to man’s vision and experience of the world, and (2) it is a crucial component to man’s meaning-making mechanisms. In the following chapters, we will especially see this second note developed across the board: from referential mania and its equivalents in Nabokov’s writings, to Beckett’s pared-down voices who express an augmentation of experience the more they are divested of selves, to Pelevin’s shape-shifters who employ the void to generate meaning (or to

exploit the ubiquity of meaninglessness), nothing and its signifiers (e.g. zero) are repeatedly associated with the creation of meaning, as well as (human) existence itself.

### ***Heidegger and Nothing***

In his 1929 lecture “What is Metaphysics?”, Heidegger argues that the very question – What is nothing? – brings us face-to-face with metaphysics, with “inquiry beyond or over beings, which aims to recover them as such and as a whole for our grasp” (106). To inquire into nothing is to inquire into that which “reveals itself as belonging to the Being of beings” (108); that is, it is because of the nothing that beings [Dasein] can come to consider themselves, and therefore come to exist. For Heidegger, only beings that question their own being exist, and it is nothing that allows for this questioning to take place: “Only in the nothing of Dasein do beings as a whole, in accord with their most proper possibility – that is, in a finite way – come to themselves” (108). Thus, nothing is not an entity, not annihilation, not negation, not “the indeterminate opposite of beings,” but “belonging to the Being of beings” (ibid). Moreover, “the nothing is more original than the ‘not’ or negation” (97): nothing is closer to an origin of being than any presence or absence. For Heidegger, nothing is less an object and more an action, an action that “does not attract [but] is essentially repelling” (103), that does not devour being into itself but repels being away from itself, thereby allowing beings to slip away as a whole and thus come into some kind of finitude, and therefore exist. It is this action of nothing that reveals that things *are*: by pushing beings back and making beings retreat as a whole (i.e. by destabilizing the whole), nothing reveals the radical strangeness and hitherto unacknowledged otherness of beings (i.e. their otherness to nothing). The “is” steps out from behind the curtain in its pushing away from nothing: “For human existence, the nothing makes possible the openedness of beings as such. The nothing does not merely serves as the counterconcept of beings; rather, it originally belongs

to their essential unfolding as such” (104). Thus, nothing’s function in the “essential unfolding” of beings allows for transcendence, selfhood, freedom, wonder, the why? – in short, it allows for human existence as we know it.

In my estimation, Heidegger’s conception of nothing (that which enables beings to *question* their being and thereby exist) also implicates language and interpretation (and therefore narrative) as essential actions of nothing that bring beings into existence. In this same lecture, Heidegger contemplates the idiomatic “nothing” that peppers our daily speech: “What about this nothing? Is it an accident that we talk this way so automatically? Is it only a manner of speaking – and nothing besides?” (95). His interrogation of this colloquial “nothing” contains within it the colloquialism he is interrogating (“and nothing besides”), which highlights the pervasiveness of “nothing” in language. This colloquialism – this “common nothing that glides so inconspicuously through our chatter, blanched with the anemic pallor of the obvious” (98) – at the very least alerts us to nothing itself, indicates that nothing (paradoxically) exists somewhere: after all, it is ubiquitous in our speech, uttered often and automatically. While Heidegger concedes that this colloquial “nothing” rests upon a definition (“The nothing is the complete negation of the totality of beings” [ibid]) that betrays a common misunderstanding and is antithetical to the non-negating nothing that is essential to Dasein, I would like to suggest that this colloquial “nothing” in fact indicates how language, like being, recedes from nothing and thus slips as a whole (i.e. common/stable language falls away, the transcendental signified becomes destabilized), thereby making possible the openedness of language and meaning. Language is like being – both come into existence through the action of nothing, by the openedness (space) that nothing creates between itself and language/being, a space that allows language and being to understand themselves in relation to the whole through their separation

from the whole, and in opposition to nothing. Nothing essentially belongs to language too, enables language to exist; this is perhaps why “nothing” is automatically employed (almost unconsciously so) by our daily language – it is part and parcel of language, as it is of being.

In a similar vein, interpretation may be regarded as an action of nothing. When we recall that for Heidegger, beings that question their own being are the only beings that exist (Dasein), and that this questioning is a direct result of being’s encounter with nothing, it becomes necessary to consider what exactly is the nature of this “questioning.” In my view, this “questioning” is a kind of interpretation – a hermeneutic action whereby the being contemplates itself and therefore comes to know itself. The act of questioning signifies that the object under question *is not a given*, but must *be given*; being is brought face to face with its own being through its self-questioning, and thereby is *given* being. As such, being is given being via a *reflection* of itself (through the process of reflecting), and interpretation is implicated in the move whereby being defines itself through its reflection. Thus, this questioning is an interpretive act of being, and Dasein’s dependence upon this questioning in order *to be* reveals that being always exists as a contemplation of itself, as a rendition of itself once removed, *as a narrative about itself*. Interpretation, inherent in being’s self-generating questioning of itself, is found to be an action of nothing that enables being to exist. The act of interpretation is therefore essential to existence, is more original than both being and language.

These ideas – (1) Heidegger’s notion that nothing enables Dasein, is an essential element to the generation of being, (2) my reading that nothing also enables language, and (3) interpretation is a function of nothing, which indicates that interpretation allows for both being and language – together form one of the main conceits of my study on narratives of nothing: that is, nothing enables the interpretive act, the very act that grants existence to beings. It is through

fiction and words – in short, through interpretation of the world, through our narratives – that existence occurs; as interpretation is nothing’s action, nothing is therefore intimately related to both narrative and being, the word and the world.

### **III. Theoretical Foundations: Nothing’s Relationship to Narrative Nietzsche, Derrida, Bakhtin, and Kristeva**

I now turn to those theoretical examinations that establish a connection between nothing and the narration of the world. As I have already hinted, this is an idea that is implied in Nietzsche’s perspectivism (which, of course, later evolves into a core principle of postmodernism – the loss of grand narratives, and the rise of plural and local truths): that any perspective is brought into existence by an act of zeroing, by a human capacity to filter out a great percentage of the world and in exchange filter in nothing itself, so as to fashion a contrast against which a comprehensible and meaningful perspective can occur. When Nietzsche, in “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” writes that “[men] are deeply immersed in illusions and in dream images,” and that “their eyes merely glide over the surface of things and see ‘forms’” (80), he depicts man as living in a fictionalized reality, a real dreamscape. Our perception and therefore experience of the world is always at least a second-hand rendition or localized and subjective version of the world, and not the world as it truly and objectively is. As we will see, this idea is particularly reminiscent of Nabokov’s notion of “reality” in quotation marks – that all “reality” is a storied version of the real, and that we cannot ever get at the real behind the stories, for it is simply nothing at all. The idea is also readily apparent in Pelevin’s work, which depicts characters who construct their various realities by controlling their own perceptions and manipulating the visions of others. Nietzsche’s perspectivism, like Nabokov’s “realities” and Pelevin’s world-generating perceptions, presents human reality as an always-already fictionalized experience, what Nietzsche calls a “movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and

anthropomorphisms” (84). Additionally, this fictionalized experience is only brought into being through the mechanics of a nothing in the system of perceptions. Nietzsche depicts this nothing as a *forgetting* that is necessary to construct any perception – a forgetting that is a prerequisite for the very act of thinking as well. This forgetting not only permits man to fashion his meaningful perceptions, but is also required in order for man to believe these perceptions to be true: “Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; [... it is] precisely *by means of this unconsciousness* and forgetfulness he arrives at his sense of truth” (ibid). That is, there is a double-function of forgetting, a twofold nothing, inherent in the construction of man’s perception. First, man employs the act of forgetting in order to construct those metaphors that function as his understanding and experience of the world. It is only by forgetting, “by overlooking what is individual and actual” (83), that man arrives at a concept of things, that he creates a perception of the world. Second, it is only by forgetting that man assuredly believes in the perception (his “moveable host of metaphors”) that he himself generated by means of forgetting: “only by forgetting that he himself is an *artistically creating* subject does man live with any repose, security, and consistency” (86). Forgetting, here, is figured as a blankness in the system; it turns an entire host and variety of being into a nothing incapable of being perceived, so as to bring into focus a certain story of being, to catch up a thread of meaningful narrative. It can be argued that what Nietzsche depicts as *forgetting* Sartre and Heidegger later refigure as nothing itself. As such, Nietzsche’s essay offers the mechanic of forgetting as an early rendition of nothing’s relationship to the construction of perceptions, experience, and, ultimately, reality.

Nietzsche’s “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” also offers an early rendition of a notion that later becomes central to postmodern theories: that is, all truths are subjective, individual, localized perceptions of the world rather than universal truths. By demonstrating that

all truth is in fact a metaphor, Nietzsche's essay anticipates the delegitimization of grand narratives, as discussed by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), and forecasts notions regarding the play of language that creates and recreates meaning absent of signifieds, as theorized by Derrida in much of his work. According to Derrida, all meaning is derived from the play of signifiers whose tethers to stable signifieds have snapped. The play and resultant construction of meaning requires nothing; as Derrida claims in an interview, "To risk meaning nothing is to start to play" (*Positions* 14). "To risk" itself carries with it an element of nothing, as the concept is founded upon a lack of guarantee that the action will prove successful; nonbeing of guarantee always accompanies the risk. Thus, Derrida conceives the play of language as instigated by risk that is itself pierced through with nothing: play begins when one *risks*, when one *concedes the potential for "meaning nothing."* Or, as Derrida writes in "Différance" (1968), "There is no support to be found and no depth to be had for this bottomless chessboard where being is set in play" (402). Here, Derrida employs yet another metaphor for the nothing that comprises the foundation for the free play of language: this "bottomless chessboard" (*échiquier sans fond*) is an emblem for the nothing that gives the space for play to occur. Textual interpretation, the production of meaning, is always *played* out on nothing itself.

As such, many of the characteristics of Derridean play point to a nothing at its catalyzing core. Play is meaningless, purposeless, useless, and profitless – in a word, totally *frivolous*. In *The Archeology of the Frivolous* (1976), Derrida discusses this concept of frivolity in relation to play and writing; frivolity – a defining quality of play – is also grounded in nothing.

Frivolity consists in being paid with marks. It is born with the sign, or rather with the signifier which, no longer signifying, is no longer a signifier. The empty, void, friable,

useless signifier. [...] As for  *futile*, it adds still more to  *frivolous* and is said chiefly of reasoning or arguments which bear on nothing. (118)

Frivolous play rests upon an empty mark, upon a signifier that connects to no signified, or, in other words, upon a signifier whose signified is nothing. Because of this signified-is-nothing, the free-play of language is unleashed. As Derrida theorizes, “One could call  *play* the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play, that is to say as the destruction of ontotheology and the metaphysics of presence” ( *Of Grammatology* 50); and again, “The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification  *ad infinitum*” (“Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” 225). Derrida repeatedly underscores the absence of a transcendental signified as that which allows for the play of signifiers, and, consequently, the production of infinite possible meanings and signification. It should be noted that Derrida designates the transcendental signified as absent namely because he is repositioning its new absent status in opposition to previous traditions in which the transcendental signified did indeed exist. Essentially, having long endured a world of an existing transcendental signified, to reconsider it as nonexistent involves a negation – causes what was once present to be absent. Especially when one equates the transcendental signified with God, the death of God corresponds to the disappearance of the transcendental signified, and both are understood as newfound absences that have taken the place of once monumental presences. Such considerations – a disappeared or absent transcendental signified – wholly depend upon a former belief in a presence.

Thus, the work of Nietzsche lays the foundation for considering nothing as the catalyzing element of any and all perceptions – what Nietzsche dubs as those metaphors (a = “not a”) that render our world comprehensible and meaningful; in short, all perception is a type of narrative

that grounds one in the world, a narrative enabled by a nothing in the system of perception. Similarly, Derrida's work pinpoints a nothing at the heart of signifiers' play that ultimately generates infinite language. It is with these ideas in mind that I turn to the theories of Bakhtin, and to Kristeva's subsequent work that builds upon Bakhtin's ideas. In the trajectory from Bakhtin to Kristeva, we uncover yet another zero at the heart of the grotesque body and the carnivalesque, an additional zero at the site of the writer, and a nothing at the place of the abject – all realms that produce poetic language and the literary narrative.

Play, of course, is at the ever-changing, ever-slipping heart of the carnivalesque, and is an essential characteristic of the perpetually becoming and transgressing grotesque body.<sup>18</sup> In *Rabalais and His World* (1965), Bakhtin describes the carnival as an event released from fixed structures and official truths; likewise, carnivalesque language is language cut loose from the rigidity of a transcendental signified and thus allowed to play freely. Because it has been released from official hierarchies and controlling/limiting universal truths, the world of carnival, as well as carnivalesque language, is endlessly at play – ceaselessly inverted and inverting, collapsing oppositions, instigated and nurtured by a nothingness of structure and rule. Writes Bakhtin, regarding a form of comic carnivalesque language typical of Rabelais' novel (the so-called *coq-à-l'âne*, “from rooster to ass,” speech):

What is the artistic and ideological meaning of this genre?

First of all, it is a game of words, current expressions (proverbs and adages), and common sequences of terms deprived of their logic and meaning. It is as if words had been released from the shackles of sense, to enjoy a play period of complete freedom and

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<sup>18</sup> Many scholars consider Bakhtin's *dialogism* (an essential feature of the carnivalesque) and Derrida's *deconstruction* to be compatible enterprises – both are eminently playful, and are similar in function and effect. See, for instance, Robert Cunliffe's “Bakhtin and Derrida: Drama and the Phoneyess of the *Phonè*” (1997), and Dragan Kujundzic's “Laughter as Otherness in Bakhtin and Derrida” (1990).

establish unusual relationships among them. True, no new consistent links are formed in most cases, but the brief coexistence of these words, expressions, and objects outside the usual logical conditions discloses their inherent ambivalence. Their multiple meanings and the potentialities that would not manifest themselves in normal conditions are revealed. (423)

“Terms deprived of their logic and meaning,” words “released from the shackles of sense” – these “enjoy a play period of complete freedom,” thereby establishing “unusual relationships,” bringing to the fore hitherto-unrealized potentialities, and underscoring the indefinite and forever-ambivalent and (therefore) promising nature of words, expression, and existence. This is the language of carnival. Like Derrida’s play of signifiers upon a “bottomless chessboard,” the words of carnival also play freely upon a non-existing foundation. Carnavalesque language does not take place on solid ground – indeed, it cannot take place there. Instead, it must take place directly upon groundlessness, upon the very void of any kind of structure. Upon the void, it is allowed true freedom and potentiality to generate without limits.

As the site where words are refreshed anew through the free play unleashed by the lack of any limiting structure, the grotesque body of carnival may be understood as the foundationless foundation – the nothing – that gives birth to the corporeal word. Central to the image of the grotesque body is its gaping (gapped) mouth, evocative of an abyss. The grotesque body’s ceaseless becoming moreover underscores its unfinished nature, its own lack of a limiting foundation or controlling center. As such, the grotesque body is the fleshy performative embodiment of the free play of language, generated upon and by a nonexistent foundation. Bakhtin writes,

The most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth. It dominates all else. The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss. The grotesque body, as we have often stressed, is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. (317)

In the above description of the grotesque body, Bakhtin highlights its two main features: first, the dominating, abyss-like mouth, which functions as a consuming nothing at the hub of the body, the rest of which is merely “a frame” surrounding this central, all-important abyss; and second, its perpetually-becoming and unfinished nature, which exemplifies the endless free play of language that ceaselessly generates, annuls, then generates again new meanings – or in this case, new bodily forms. The grotesque body is thus the free play of language personified: free play (ever-becoming/un-becoming flesh) that frames a catalyzing abyss (the mouth). Indeed, as Bakhtin points out, the central characters of Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (c. 1532-1564) take their names from words meaning “throat” and/or “glutton,” thereby establishing a clear connection between the abyss-like mouth and these central characters upon which the narrative circulates and generates. Bakhtin points out that the name Gargantua and its nicknames connote “gluttony, swallowing, devouring, banqueting” (459). In particular, “In Spanish *gargantua* means the throat. The Provençal tongue has the word ‘gargantuan,’ meaning glutton. Apparently, Gargantua’s etymology is similar to that of the names of the other heroes: throat, gullet” (459n4). Likewise, “The etymology of Pantagruel has a similar connotation, the ‘ever-thirsting’” (460). By virtue of the etymology of their names, Gargantua and Pantagruel may be read as giant personified mouths – two gaping nothings, consuming holes, that quite physically nourish and generate their own surrounding and supporting flesh (“the frame”) that in turn supports the very

bodily hole that spurs its being; more importantly (for the present purposes), they figure as embodiments of the nothing that produces the narrative around them (the text, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, itself).

As such, carnivalesque language is exhibited in the functioning of the grotesque body. As the grotesque body is in a perpetual state of (un-)becoming, so carnivalesque language is comprised of forever shuffling signifiers that endlessly (un-)create new meanings. And as the (un-)becoming of the grotesque body is catalyzed by an abyss-like mouth at its center, so the free play of carnivalesque language is dependent upon the non-existence of any limiting structure or rigid order, upon a sheer nothingness that allows for a pure potentiality of meanings to proliferate. The grotesque body is, moreover, the site that produces both words and the world; specifically, the abyss-like mouth is the very place where words and world meet. On the one hand, the mouth directly connects the body with the physical world around it – and with its own physicality – through the process of eating. Writes Bakhtin, “The encounter of man with the world, which takes place inside the open, biting, rending, chewing mouth, is one of the most ancient, and most important objects of human thought and imagery. Here man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself” (281). And on the other hand, the mouth is the site of language, the tongue that produces the word *that narrates the body* in relation to the world, thereby generating the corporeal word. The grotesque body, therefore, illustrates the body consuming and thus uniting with the world, and it also demonstrates the production of the word made flesh. Bakhtin writes:

The word is localized in the mouth and in the head (thought); from there it is transferred to the abdomen and is pushed out under the impact of the Harlequin’s head. This traditional gesture of the head ramming the abdomen or the buttocks is essentially

topographical. Here once more we have the logic of opposites, the contact of the upper and lower level. [...] Thus the entire mechanism of the word is transferred from the apparatus of speech to the abdomen. An objective analysis of this brief scene discloses the fundamental and essential traits of the grotesque. It reveals a great wealth and fullness of meaning, worked out to the smallest detail. It has at the same time a universal character; it is a miniature satirical drama of the word, of its material birth, or the drama of the body giving birth to the word. (309)

This “drama of the body giving birth to the word,” as exhibited in the workings of the grotesque body, begins, of course at the abyss-like mouth, at the nothing that generates the always-becoming and unfinished body (text) that frames it.

These notions of a figuration of nothing (the abyss-like mouth; nonexistent structures; the condition of being released from rules and order) that conditions carnivalesque language and the grotesque body are admittedly underdeveloped in Bakhtin’s work. That is, the designation of the mouth, for instance, as an embodiment of nothing is not explicitly played out in Bakhtin’s discussion, except for, perhaps, that single moment where Bakhtin describes the mouth as an abyss. These conceptions – the grotesque body’s mouth and the nonexistent structure that supports carnivalesque language as figurations of nothing that catalyze both narrative and world – are my own readings of the implications of Bakhtin’s theories. However, the work of Kristeva, which draws upon Bakhtin’s, unambiguously teases out this nothing at the heart of carnival and poetic language.

In “Word, Dialogue, and Novel” (1969) Kristeva presents the writer, “the very origin of narration,” as a zero: “At the very origin of narration, at the very moment when the writer appears, we experience emptiness. [...] On the basis of this anonymity, this zero where the

author is situated, the *he/she* of the character is born” (74-75). Kristeva figures the writer as the zero in whom manifests the object of narration and narration itself, which, accordingly, “transform the subject [the writer of the narrative] into an *author*” (75). The writer must disappear, “become an anonymity, an absence, a blank space,” so as to permit “the structure to exist as such” (74). The writer passes through what Kristeva dubs a “zero-stage” in order to render himself/herself a blank space upon which the narrative world and structure can be built; in turn, this rooted-in-zero narrative structure, through the discursive workings of the narrative’s reader, crafts the writer as an author. Once again, like the mathematical zero, a figuration of nothingness functions at once as the generator of the system and outside of that system – excepted from the very system it conditions: as Kristeva is quick to specify, “In a literary text, 0 does not exist; emptiness is quickly replaced by a ‘one’ (a *he/she*, or a *proper name*) that is really twofold, since it is subject [writer] and addressee [reader]” (75). It follows that the language produced by writer-as-zero is “poetic language” (similar, as we will see, to carnivalesque language), which Kristeva designates as an “otherness” of language, a language of materiality. For Kristeva, “poetic language” stands in sharp contrast to language of transparency that is used for ordinary communication; in the language of transparency, the word itself is not sensed (the signifier is forgotten) but instead serves as a vessel that houses the signified. In contrast, Kristeva highlights carnival as an example of “poetic language” (the language of materiality). Taking a page from Bakhtin, Kristeva presents carnival as the meeting of two “texts,” a meeting that reduces these texts to nothing, and, by virtue of this nothingness, revitalizes them anew, injecting flesh into the word. This is quite similar to the function of writer-as-zero that conditions both narrative and author:

[Carnival] is a spectacle, but without a stage; a game, but also a daily undertaking; a signifier, but also a signified. That is, two texts meet, contradict, and relativize each other. A carnival participant is both actor and spectator; he loses his sense of individuality, passes through a zero point of carnivalesque activity and splits into a subject of the spectacle and an object of the game. Within the carnival, the subject is reduced to nothingness, while the structure of *the author* emerges as anonymity that creates and sees itself created as self and other, as mask and man. (78)

“A spectacle, but without a stage”: again, a system without a foundation, another version of Derrida’s “bottomless chessboard,” comes to the forefront. There is the meeting of word (signifier) with the world (signified) at a zero point – a nothingness – that unites the word with the world, not unlike the figure of the grotesque body. Such material language is constantly slipping and regenerating, as it plays upon a completely unfixed zero, upon a nonexistent stage. Additionally, Kristeva, like Bakhtin, relates this language to the modern condition and its loss of epic wholeness; that is, the elements of carnivalesque language are symptomatic of a condition wherein man has become a stranger to himself. Modern man is perpetually becoming by virtue of a nothing at his ever-deferring center, but therefore is never able to fully know or define himself as he is always in a state of incessant indefiniteness. Writes Kristeva, “[these elements of carnivalesque language] destroy man’s epic and tragic unity as well as his belief in identity and causality; they indicate that he has lost his totality and no longer coincides with himself. At the same time, they often appear as an exploration of language and writing” (83). This understanding of modern man’s loss of totality and identity in terms of the grotesque body and carnivalesque language rewrites the typical narrative of the modern condition that holds man’s newfound inability to “coincide with himself” and loss of epic wholeness as situations to be lamented:

instead, the modern condition is reconceived as affirmative and brimming with potentiality, an idea that gains more credence, of course, as the cultural tide shifts into postmodernism. Indeed, Kristeva points out that such a re-conceptualization ignites “exploration of language and writing,” an exploration that pierces the heart of meaning-making mechanisms.

Kristeva’s analysis of zero in relation to writing and “poetic language” (e.g. carnivalesque language) appears again in her later study on abjection, which, as I argue in “Chapter Five,” functions as the dark underbelly of carnival. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva defines nothing itself as “the maternal phallus,” and as “precisely such a point that writing takes over” (42). The maternal phallus represents an unrealized oxymoron. On the one side, it is comprised of the maternal, a primary site and embodiment of the abject.<sup>19</sup> And on the other side, there is the phallus – that which structures all knowable and official existence, establishes the subject/object distinction, and reinforces that distinction, again and again, with its laws, order, and hierarchies. This oxymoronic consideration of the “maternal phallus” as nothing exhibits nothing’s double-edged nature as that which is required for existence/writing and, simultaneously, as that which must be thrust aside in order to allow for existence/writing. Kristeva argues that any phobic object (any object of abjection) figures as a “hallucination of nothing” that the writer incessantly harkens back to and endlessly writes from (ibid). This nothing causes anguish, but “it is anguish that causes us to speak” (ibid). Once again, we find that nothing is intimately bound up with the creation of narrative, the compulsion to word.

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<sup>19</sup> As the abject is that tenuous, archaic, and meaningless state prior to the creation of the subject/object distinction, all that revolting ambiguity that must be “permanently thrust aside in order to live” (*Powers of Horror* 3), so the maternal body is a primary location of the abject where beings exist prior to their subject/object split. Kristeva discusses the abjection of the maternal body at length throughout *Powers of Horror*; in particular, see the sections “Confronting the Maternal” (54-55), and “Those Females Who Can Wreck the Infinite” (157-173).

The works of Nietzsche, Derrida, Bakhtin, and Kristeva therefore exhibit a common refrain despite their many divergences: nothing is essential to narrative, is a catalyzing force of narrative that paradoxically remains beyond the bounds of narrative itself. The implications of their theories indicate that nothing is intimately bound up with the creation of any narrative, not unlike Heidegger's and Sartre's philosophies regarding nothing's essential relationship to being. Likewise, the mathematical zero's relationship to the number line is similar to nothing's relationship to being and narrative: zero is the vital element that at once structures the mathematical system and permits new developments within that system (e.g. imaginary numbers, calculus, abstract math) – new developments that may potentially undermine the system itself. Zero therefore generates the scope and nature of modern mathematics, but is itself exempt from the rules that govern that system; indeed, is not wholly a number, a part of the system. As such, zero's relationship to the mathematical schema functions as an allegory of nothing's relationship to being and narrative. Of course, zero also represents a signifier of nothing – a sign that works to articulate or represent nothing. As such, zero is both the signifier of nothing, and functions as nothing itself in relation to the number line: it is both signifier and signified. In the following chapters, we will also see how nothing itself functions as both the signifier and the signified, ultimately arriving at the notion of nothing as the transcendental signified that is infinitely restructured by the very signifiers it generates.

**Chapter Two**  
**Prototypes: Akaky Akakievich and Bartleby as Nothings that Write Narrative**

Nikolai Gogol's character Akaky Akakievich of "The Overcoat" (1842), and Herman Melville's Bartleby of "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" (1853), both figure as the scribe who writes nothing, and as the nothing that writes narrative. Taken together, Akaky Akakievich and Bartleby function as twin polar stars in a constellation of literary texts that give narrative form to nothing, and that explore nothing's essential role in relation to narrative and being. That is, these characters are models for writers who compose nothing into their texts; additionally, they are embodiments of nothing itself, and thereby demonstrate, through their interactions with other characters, nothing's impact on the (narrative) world. In other words, they are Vladimir Nabokov, Samuel Beckett, and Victor Pelevin – the three writers that form this study's central focus – as well as any writer who writes nothing. A comparative analysis of Akaky Akakievich and Bartleby therefore functions as a meta-analysis of all writers who write nothing, and of nothing's capacity to generate narrative and being.

Additionally, both "The Overcoat" and "Bartleby" are stories that function as lodestars in their respective Russian and Anglo-American modern literary traditions, and have even transgressed their own national boundaries, becoming highly influential works in many literary and philosophical communities worldwide. In a famous yet undocumented statement that is traditionally attributed to Fyodor Dostoevsky, and that has gained credence throughout the past two centuries, it has been suggested that Russian writers of the mid-nineteenth century and beyond "came out from Gogol's 'Overcoat.'" Gogol's literary artistry – in particular, the mastery of that style as displayed in "The Overcoat" – had an inexorable bearing on the literary themes and forms of his day, a bearing that arguably carries into twentieth-century literature. Likewise, Melville's "Bartleby," while garnering little attention at the time of its initial publication, has

since become one of the most cited and analyzed of American short stories, having inspired over hundreds of articles and books on this single work alone. Additionally, “Bartleby” has generated prodigious philosophical commentary in the twentieth century by such influential thinkers as Giorgio Agamben (“Bartleby, or On Contingency” [1999]), Blanchot (*The Writing of Disaster* [1980]), Gilles Deleuze (“Bartleby; or, the Formula” [1997]), and Derrida (*The Gift of Death* [1992]), among others. As such, these two stories together function as an important backdrop to the writings of Nabokov, Beckett, and Pelevin.

“The Overcoat” and “Bartleby the Scrivener” each follow a similar basic plotline: in the first half of each story, both Akaky Akakievich and Bartleby are characterized as nothings who produce a great deal of writing; in the second half of each story, each character stops writing, and therefore becomes a scribe who has ceased writing, or a writer who writes nothing. My analysis will follow this basic plotline, first exploring Akaky Akakievich and Bartleby as creative and affecting nothings, and second examining their transition into writers who write nothing.

From its outset, “The Overcoat” presents Akaky Akakievich as a non-existing character, described more in terms of what he is not than in terms of what he is; in short, Akaky Akakievich’s main condition is that of *is not*, or of *not being*. Writes the narrator, “And so, in a *certain department* there was a *certain clerk*; a certain clerk of whom it cannot be said that he was very remarkable; he was short, somewhat pock-marked, with rather reddish hair and rather dim, bleary eyes, with a small bald patch on the top of his head [...]” (305).<sup>20</sup> In characterizing Akaky, the narrator repeatedly steers away from applying a definite description to him, and instead utilizes the ambiguous *несколько* (“somewhat,” “rather”); this suggests, first of all, the ambiguity of Akaky himself, the indefiniteness of his character that therefore cannot be

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<sup>20</sup> «Итак, в *одном департаменте* служил *один чиновник*; чиновник нельзя сказать чтобы очень замечательный, низенького роста, несколько рябоват, несколько рыжеват, несколько даже на вид подслеповат, с небольшой лысиной на лбу [...]» (349).

transcribed into definite descriptions. However, such ambiguous descriptors may also indicate the impossibility of transcribing something that is not there: perhaps the narrator cannot place his pen upon Akaky because there is nothing there to place his pen upon. Furthermore, those attributes that are positively bestowed upon Akaky are themselves nullified, functioning as signifiers of something that no longer works or no longer exists – e.g. unremarkable, a bald spot, and eyes that are dimmed. The emphasis on a *certain* department and a *certain* clerk (in Russian, the indefinite *один* is employed) is another type of circumlocution, whereby the narrative attempts to evade its topic, or to speak of its subject by not speaking about it. Such a technique indicates, on the one hand, that the topic under (non)discussion is a sensitive matter, but it also indicates, on the other hand, that the narrative’s topic is not there: such dancing around a definite description and description by means of nullification imply that there is nothing actually to describe, that Akaky Akakievich is an embodiment of nothing itself. Indeed, the narrator confesses “it cannot be said” about Akaky – we should read this confession quite literally.

This notion is further supported by the text’s erasure of much of Akaky’s history (e.g. “No one has been able to remember when and how long ago he entered the department, nor who gave him the job” [306]<sup>21</sup>), and his quality of living unnoticed (e.g. “The porters [...] took no more notice of him than if a simple fly had flown across the reception room” [ibid]<sup>22</sup>). Most significantly, Akaky’s defective old overcoat – also an embodiment of nothing (as I will shortly demonstrate) – serves as a metonym for Akaky himself: like Akaky, the coat is the victim of many office jokes, and has also been deprived of an honorable name (the name “Akaky Akakievich” has scatological connotations, derived from the verb *kakat*, which is a childish

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<sup>21</sup> «Когда и в какое время он поступил в департамент и кто определил его, этого никто не мог припомнить» (350).

<sup>22</sup> «Сторожа [...] даже не глядели на него, как будто бы через приемную пролетела простая муха» (350).

word for defecation; the overcoat is referred to as a “dressing gown,” *kapot*, which signifies a women’s garment). Moreover, both Akaky and this coat are noted for a messily-patched/splotched complexion: Akaky’s “somewhat pockmarked” face, and the coat’s “clumsy and ugly” patches (310).<sup>23</sup> The most important parallel between Akaky and this coat, however, lies in their shared qualities of nothing. The coat is threadbare, worn, and with many holes – in short, it is *nothing*, as Akaky’s tailor, Petrovich, affirms: “‘There’s *nothing* to put a patch on. There is *nothing* for it to hold on to; there is a great strain on it; it is not worth calling cloth; it would fly away [*scatter in the air*] at a breath of wind’” (313, emphasis mine).<sup>24</sup> Petrovich’s assertion that *there’s nothing to put a patch on* is reminiscent of the narrator’s inability to put his pen upon Akaky Akakievich, as discussed above; Petrovich cannot fix the coat because there is nothing left to fix, whereas the narrator cannot fix his pen upon Akaky because there is nothing there to describe. Moreover, when Petrovich announces the overcoat’s “nothingness” (*there’s nothing to put a patch on*) and asserts that Akaky needs a new one, Akaky’s own nothingness and need for a new self is called into awareness and thereby into reality, not unlike the superstitious magic whereby one names the devil, and in so doing summons him into one’s presence: “At [Petrovich’s] word ‘new’ there was a mist before Akaky Akakievich’s eyes, and everything in the room seemed blurred. He could see nothing clearly but the general with the piece of paper over his face on the lid of Petrovich’s snuffbox” (313).<sup>25</sup> This peculiar vision of the anonymous general is another signifier of nothing, as the general’s face has been punched

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<sup>23</sup> «Подтачивание не показывало искусства портного, и выходило, точно мешковато и некрасиво» (354).

<sup>24</sup> «– Да заплаточки не на чем положить, укрепиться ей не за что, поддержка больно велика. Только слава, что сукно, а подуй ветер, так разлетится» (357).

<sup>25</sup> «При слове 'новую' у Акакия Акакиевича затуманило в глазах, и все, что ни было в комнате, так и пошло пред ним путаться. Он видел ясно одного только генерала с заклеенным бумажкой лицом, находившегося на крышке Петровичевой табакерки» (357).

through and covered with a square of paper – he has been rendered blank. Akaky, like the general, is the man with no face; like the old overcoat, he is nothing.

Besides embodying nothing, Akaky Akakievich's only other characteristic at the beginning of the story is his love of copying. So completely does Akaky love to copy that his world is literally composed of his copies' letters and lines; his life, in other words, is equated with copying. Writes the narrator, "It would be hard to find a man who lived for his work as did Akaky Akakievich. To say that he was zealous in his work is not enough; no, he loved his work. In it, in that copying, he found an interesting and pleasant world of his own" (307).<sup>26</sup> Akaky not only walks around town and sees nothing but "his clear, evenly written lines" (308),<sup>27</sup> he himself reflects and embodies the letters he so loves to copy: "[...] certain letters were favorites with him, and when he came to them he was delighted; he chuckled to himself and winked and moved his lips, so that it seemed as though every letter his pen was forming could be read in his face" (307).<sup>28</sup> Here we find a miniature and parodic version of the "word made flesh" (or, I should say, the "*letter* made flesh") in the copying of Akaky: the letters fill his life quite corporeally, yet at the same time, they are quite meaningless. Akaky does not seem to register the *content* of his copies; it is not as though he lives in the narrative world of whatever manuscript he is copying (as, for instance, many of Nabokov's characters). Rather, his world is composed of letters and lines – these rudimentary parts and tools of narrative – and not of narrative itself; he is, quite

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<sup>26</sup> «Вряд ли где можно было найти человека, который так жил бы в своей должности. Мало сказать: он служил ревностно – нет, он служил с любовью. Там, в этом переписыванье, ему виделся какой-то свой разнообразный и приятный мир» (351).

<sup>27</sup> «[...] свои чистые, ровным почерком выписанные строки [...]» (352).

<sup>28</sup> «[...] некоторые буквы у него были фавориты, до которых если он добирался, то был сам не свой: и подсмеивался, и подмигивал, и помогал губами, так что в лице его, казалось, можно было прочесть всякую букву, которую выводило перо его» (351).

literally, illiterate. He therefore, in his incarnation of “letters and lines made flesh,” embodies writing that is void of meaning.

What, then, is the relationship between Akaky as an embodiment of nothing, and as an embodiment of copying? His name, after all, reflects these two characteristics: the scatological connotations also imply a kind of nothing, and his own name is a twofold reverberation (doubly-copied) of his father’s. This connection between nothing and copying signifies, first and foremost, the notion of nothing as meaningless – which represents the colloquial, everyday understanding of nothing, what Heidegger calls the “idiomatic” and “automatic” nothing that laces, ubiquitously and unconsciously, throughout our daily speech. I designate this meaningless, colloquial nothing as “nothing in the surface degree”: it is nothing taken literally, the surface meaning (or meaninglessness) of nothing, which understands nothing as lacking in meaning and significance – a nothing that does not need to be contemplated or considered. As Akaky’s copying merely amounts to the “letter made flesh” (not the word or the meaning made flesh), so his quality of nothingness may be read as an expression of his meaninglessness. Should we, like most of his co-workers, read only the surface of Akaky Akakievich and his nothingness, then we will also arrive at this colloquial notion of meaningless nothing. In a word, if we fail to decipher Akaky’s cipher, we are left with a nothing whose potential meanings and creativity are lost.

However, should we probe beyond the surface of Akaky Akakievich’s nothingness, we find that it is, indeed, quite meaningful. This is demonstrated by those characters, including the story’s narrator, who begin to contemplate or take a closer look at Akaky: in each case, they are profoundly affected by their association with him. For example, a young clerk who participates in mocking Akaky is transformed by the experience:

And long afterward, during moments of the greatest gaiety, the figure of the humble little clerk with a bald patch on his head appeared before him with his heart-rending words: “Leave me alone! Why do you insult me?” and within those moving words he heard others: “I am your brother.” And the poor young man hid his face in his hands, and many times afterward in his life he shuddered, seeing how much inhumanity there is in man [...]. (307)<sup>29</sup>

Here, a sense of humanity rises to the fore where before there was none, only the ridicule of an insignificant being. The recurring memory of Akaky has physiological, emotional, and moral effects on the young clerk, causing him to viscerally feel shame and emotionally experience the dearth of compassion in the world. In short, Akaky both incites humanity and exposes its lack. He has a similar effect on the so-called “Person of Consequence”: “He even began brooding over poor Akaky Akakievich, and from that time forward, he was almost every day haunted by the image of the poor clerk who had been unable to survive the official reprimand” (331).<sup>30</sup> Sympathy also, at times, wells up in the narrator, whose tone often subtly mocks Akaky, not unlike the mocking of the office clerks. However, his occasional-mocking tone does not undo the fact that he has been compelled to write this very story we now hold in our hands, even though, he repeatedly reminds us, much of Akaky’s history has been lost or is indescribable. In other words, Akaky Akakievich inspires writing, narrative, the telling of a story despite the narrator’s frequent claim that there is not much to tell; the narrator is inspired to write seemingly in spite of

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<sup>29</sup> «И долго потом, среди самых веселых минут, представлялся ему низенький чиновник с лысинкою на лбу, с своими проникающими словами: «Оставьте меня, зачем вы меня обижаете?» – и в этих проникающих словах звенели другие слова: «Я брат твой». И закрывал себя рукою бедный молодой человек, и много раз содрогался он потом на веку своем, видя, как много в человеке бесчеловечья [...]» (351).

<sup>30</sup> «Он даже задумался о бедном Акакии Акакиевиче. И с этих пор почти всякий день представлялся ему влудный Акакий Акакиевич, не выдержавший должностного распеканья» (373).

himself. In fact, the narrator was not the first to tell stories about Akaky; the office clerks many times enjoyed inventing their own narratives about him: “The young clerks jeered and made jokes at him to the best of their clerkly wit, and told before his face all sorts of stories of their own invention about him” (306).<sup>31</sup> Akaky, it seems, inspires others to produce fiction and tell stories about this nobody of a man, offering up a blank slate for others to create their own narrative worlds.

How Akaky affects these characters analogously illustrates nothing’s potential effects. Akaky/nothing causes awareness of one’s existence as a man, thereby marking lines between the human and inhuman; after all, the young clerk’s vision is brought to focus on these very lines (“he shuddered, seeing how much inhumanity there is in man” [307]). As Heidegger’s nothing renders being aware of itself in the form of Dasein, so Akaky’s nothingness triggers a consciousness of humanity in the young clerk, and, by proxy, creates distinctions between the human and inhuman. Along these same lines, Akaky’s nothingness also, as Sartre might argue, appears to go hand-in-hand with the condition of being human. Many times the narrator universalizes Akaky’s story, thereby insinuating that this tale *before* us is also a tale *about* us – a story about a man who encounters “the various disasters strewn along the road of life, not only of titular, but even of privy, actual courts, and all other councilors” (309),<sup>32</sup> a narrative about “a creature on whom disease fell as it falls upon the heads of the mighty ones of this world ... !” (329).<sup>33</sup> If we read Akaky as an embodiment of nothing, then we must also read ourselves this

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<sup>31</sup> «Молодые чиновники подсмеивались и острились над ним, во сколько хватало канцелярского остроумия, рассказывали тут же пред ним разные составленные про него истории» (351).

<sup>32</sup> «... если бы не было разных бедствий, рассыпанных на жизненной дороге не только титулярным, но даже тайным, действительным, надворным и всяким советникам ...» (353).

<sup>33</sup> «... и на которое так же потом нестерпимо обрушилось несчастье, как обрушивалось на царей и повелителей мира ...» (372).

way, for the narrative repeatedly reminds us that the tragedy that befalls Akaky could happen to anyone, that his story is not anomalous, but universal – a story about the condition of being human. It follows that the nothingness we perceive in Akaky is the nothingness that dwells in our own beings, allowing our beings to come into existence (as Heidegger might argue), or acting as an expression of our human condition (as Sartre might claim).

Halfway through “The Overcoat,” Akaky stops copying; the narrator notes that the evening after his new overcoat’s debut, “He dined in excellent spirits and after dinner wrote nothing, no papers at all” (319-320)<sup>34</sup> – emphasizing not once but twice that Akaky wrote nothing. And after this night, Akaky never again picks up his pen. This twist adds another manifestation of nothingness to the story, one that reinforces nothing’s relationship to narrative. Whereas the story’s first half may be read as a story about nothing itself (Akaky) and its effects (generates humanity, enables the condition of man, ignites storytelling), the second half of the story may be read as the narrative of a writer (Akaky) who writes nothing. That is, the second half delivers a triad of meta-stories: (1) “The Overcoat” itself as a narrative embodiment of nothing; (2) the narrator writes about Akaky, and therefore writes about nothing; and (3) Gogol writes “The Overcoat,” and thereby writes nothing into narrative. The notion of the scribe who has ceased writing, or who, in other words, now literally writes nothing, switches into effect once Akaky stops writing midway through the story. From this perspective, to write nothing becomes a method for producing narrative and, indeed, meaning: the story does not cease but instead multiplies in scope, dimension, and theme. Once Akaky begins to write nothing, life, for him, expands exponentially: Akaky experiences, for the first time, a party (adventure), chasing women (romance?!), being robbed (tragedy), delirium (madness), death (tragedy, again), and the

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<sup>34</sup> «Пообедал он весело и после обеда уж ничего не писал, никаких бумаг» (363).

afterlife as a corpse (rebirth! resolution!) – all these life (and out-of-life) experiences and literary genres are his as he writes nothing, as if to do so encompasses the whole of human and fictional wor(l)ds. Whereas before he lived in a world composed only of the rudimentary parts of language (letters and lines), he now begins to live in narrative. To write nothing, paradoxically, is to write the narrative world.

Turning now to Melville's "Bartleby," we find that it shares many of the same themes as Gogol's "The Overcoat." The narrator of the story, (a lawyer who once employed Bartleby as a scrivener), presents Bartleby as remarkable precisely because little is known about him, and peculiar for his characteristic inaction, silence, stillness, colorlessness – in short, Bartleby is another paradigm of nothing. Writes the lawyer, "I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature. Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable except from the original sources, and, in his case, those are very small" (3). Here, Bartleby is first presented as a lost text, as an erased narrative, "an irreparable loss to literature." However, the lawyer immediately admits that *nothing* is ascertainable from Bartleby; that is, Bartleby signifies nothing. It becomes difficult, therefore, to consider Bartleby's story as a *loss* to literature when Bartleby himself figures as nothing, as a loss necessarily depends upon a positive presence, and Bartleby is anything but. What is achieved by the lawyer's writing this account of Bartleby is not, therefore, the recuperation of this so-called loss to literature, but the creation of a new literary work that exhibits nothing's effects on humanity through Bartleby's impact on the lawyer and his office.

The lawyer's description of his first vision of Bartleby is laced with an aura of nothingness: "a motionless young man one morning stood upon my office threshold, the door being open, for it was summer. I can see that figure now – pallidly neat, pitiably respectable,

incurably forlorn! It was Bartleby” (9). Like Akaky Akakievich, Bartleby is described via a kind of negative aesthetics: we are told what he lacks, rather than what he is, and his condition of being is a kind of being-less-ness. He is motionless (the lawyer later discovers this is indeed Bartleby’s condition, as he never eats, never goes anywhere, and soon never does anything); pallid, as if he offers no color or character (throughout he is repeatedly referred to as grey, pale, sedate, and dim, both in appearance and in spirit); and forlorn, deserted once and for all (and indeed, Bartleby is deserted by the lawyer, and by society writ large, by the story’s end: “he seemed alone, absolutely alone in the universe. A bit of wreck in the mid-Atlantic” [21]). It is significant that Bartleby first appears on the threshold, which indicates that he resides in the liminal space between two realms. Later passages give clues as to the nature of this liminal space, employing terms such as “ghost” (14; 27), “apparition” (16; 27) “cadaverous” (16; 19; 24), and “haunting” (29) to describe Bartleby’s nature and actions. Such terms suggest that Bartleby resides, like nothing, in the realm between presence and absence, or in a realm beyond such distinctions as presence and absence. For the lawyer, he is a paradoxical existing nonexistence.

Bartleby’s famous response to the lawyer’s requests, “I prefer not to,” is itself a kind of zeroed statement, combining an expression of one’s will in the form of a preference (which is itself a deconstruction of will) with the negation (“not to”). “To prefer” is not a wholly-positive statement of one’s will, but is rather a statement of one’s ideal will that may not necessarily be willed; often, the action of the willed preference is dependent upon the agency of another, and not of the self who has the preference. The combination of “to prefer” – a kind of self-will that gives agency to the other – with the action “not to” creates a statement of will that is, in effect, a non-statement. In other words, Bartleby never says “no” or “yes”; he just says that he “prefers

not to,” and therefore sidesteps any request that requires a “no” or “yes” response – he says what amounts to nothing.

Finally, Bartleby’s rumored past employment at the Dead Letter Office is another way in which the narrative associates him with nothing. The lawyer imagines Bartleby sorting through dead letters – messages that were never delivered to the intended recipient, often because the recipient is dead or lost. In my estimation, dead letters are symbols of meaning reduced to zero, or even of the impossibility of transferring meaning from one subject to another. These letters, the lawyer insinuates, affected Bartleby in such a way that he too became a kind of dead letter – both emblems of potential meaningfulness, but ultimately exemplify naught: “Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men? [...] On errands of life, these letters speed to death” (34). In short, Bartleby is represented by the narrator as a nonliving living being, as a figure whose defining quality is his lack of qualities, whose distinguishing actions are his non-actions, and whose meaning, like the dead letters, promises significance but never delivers.

Like Akaky Akakievich, Bartleby’s only active characteristic in the beginning of the story is his devotion to copying, which is depicted as a kind of unquenchable obsession:

At first, Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sunlight and by candlelight. I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious.

But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically. (9)

Again, as in “The Overcoat,” we are presented with a figure whose two main qualities are nothing and copying. Here, Bartleby embodies the nothing that writes, as if his life is equated with the act of copying and nothing besides. There is no hint of humanity in Bartleby – no

emotion, mood, hunger, vivacity, or tiredness – but instead he functions like an automaton, “mechanically” the lawyer tells us, like a machine and not like a man. He is the nothing that yields or allows for any narrative, enabling, indeed, the proliferation of any narrative; but he himself is without narrative, pale and silent and absent of character, a blank man about which nothing can be written, other than nothing or our (and the lawyer’s) perplexed reactions to his non-demeanor. Moreover, the copies Bartleby generates fit right in with the lawyer’s world – eminently readable handwriting, no blotches to complain about (unlike the copies made by Turkey and Nippers); but he himself remains an enigma, and indecipherable cipher, especially when the narrator attempts to “read” him as he would any other man. Ultimately, the lawyer cannot figure out (or, cipher out) how to read Bartleby, and therefore does not know how to react to him, or, eventually, even how to fit him into his world. For example, the first time Bartleby tells the lawyer that he “prefers not to,” the lawyer is confounded by how to respond, precisely because there is no recognizable emotion or posturing in Bartleby’s statement and behavior: “Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been anything ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises” (10). Bartleby, in his distinguishing nothingness, is an impossibly unreadable man, for he is without narrative and characteristics. Without desires or a life of his own, he can generate narrative without hindrance, and without putting any limits on the production of narrative – he writes ceaselessly day and night, which we may assume he can do because he has no life of his own to live, no narrative of his own to unravel. As such, he operates in the first half of the story as the nothing that produces meaning (copies that fit right in with the lawyer’s world) but is itself meaningless (nobody can read him, decipher his motives or character – he remains an inaccessible text, or a blank page).

Once Bartleby stops writing, however, he becomes from the lawyer's perspective the scrivener who writes nothing, and, from our perspective, he becomes the nothing that nothings. As Giorgio Agamben puts it, "As a scribe who has stopped writing, Bartleby is the extreme figure of the Nothing" (253). This embrace of nothing that accompanies Bartleby's "preference not to" copy has many effects. First, Bartleby as the nothing that nothings, or as the scribe who writes nothing, renders topsy-turvy the lawyer's world. The lawyer repeatedly tells us that Bartleby "disarmed" (11, 16), "disconcerted" (11), and "unmanned" him (16), and begins to "stagger in his own plainest faith" (11). By his association with Bartleby, he is "turned into a pillar of salt" (11), "thunderstruck" (23), and feels "disqualified for the time from churchgoing" (18). In other words, Bartleby causes the lawyer to call into question all those truths upon which his life is structured. This is Bartleby's (and nothing's) first effect on the existence around him: he destabilizes it, turns what was once decidedly understood and unquestionably accepted into a matter of inquiry, enables questions regarding metaphysics. As Heidegger argues that nothing is that which allows us the finitude and space to question our own beings, so Bartleby as nothing throws into inquiry the lawyer's perception of his world, causing him to reconsider his place in it.

The second effect of Bartleby is a derivative of the first: he causes the lawyer to reassess his responsibility to others, and to meditate upon the condition of humanity. Writes the lawyer, "For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me. Before I had never experienced aught but a riot unpleasing sadness. The bond of common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam" (17). Catalyzed by Bartleby, the lawyer's growing experience of humanity is accompanied by melancholy, as if the two go hand-in-hand. The lawyer's final lamentation

reiterates this kinship between Bartleby and humanity, both of which inspire a feeling of melancholy: cries the lawyer, “Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!” (34). Here, there is a three-pronged relationship composed of Bartleby/nothing, humanity, and melancholy, and the lawyer finds himself ensconced among this triad. As already discussed, the link between melancholy and nothingness is well established by Freud in his essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” and here the application of Freud’s notions illuminate some interesting readings on the lawyer’s condition in relation to Bartleby. As melancholy is characterized by Freud as the empty ego, as the presence of nothing in the subject’s psychic conception of itself, so the growing feeling of melancholy within the lawyer indicates that nothing is taking hold of his own self. In fact, the provocation of melancholy in the lawyer indicates that he is not merely experiencing the loss of another (Bartleby), which would only inspire mourning, but that he is also experiencing the lack of his own self. The lawyer’s experience of melancholy indicates that nothing has also made a home in his own being, not just in his office in the form of a placid scrivener. As we witnessed in “The Overcoat,” nothing is seen to generate humanity (it inspires feelings of humanity in the lawyer), and is characterized as a condition of humanity (the lawyer’s melancholy represents the presence of nothing in his own being).

The third effect of Bartleby upon the lawyer is that he compels this self-described “unambitious” man to pick up his pen and write (3). Bartleby’s nothingness, therefore, generates narrative, the actual story whose pages we now hold in our hands. Here, we should recall that the lawyer himself, in the opening pages of the story, characterizes the loss of Bartleby’s history as an “irreparable loss to literature.” To write the story of Bartleby, (who, of course, embodies nothing), is to write literature; nothing, therefore, is once again conceived as the progenitor of narrative. Additionally, Bartleby inspires the lawyer to ceaseless interpretation: the lawyer’s time

with Bartleby is distinguished by his repeated attempts to “read” and meaningfully “analyze” this scrivener who functions as an indecipherable text, or as a text that endlessly eschews interpretation. However, it is not despite but due to the impenetrable and unreadable nature of Bartleby that the lawyer’s desire to interpret augments exponentially. That is, Bartleby’s opaque nothingness perpetually ignites the lawyer’s need to make sense of him, to interpret in order to gather his meaning, make him intelligible. As a paradigm of nothing, Bartleby therefore inspires narrative, the creation of literature, and the interpretative act by which new readings and meanings of literature are infinitely born.

Taken together, Gogol’s “The Overcoat” and Melville’s “Bartleby” illustrate nothing’s various effects on narrative, interpretation, existence, and humanity, and function as allegories of the writer who writes (about) nothing. It is to these writers of nothing that I now turn my attention.

### Chapter Three Cradling the Abyss: Vladimir Nabokov and the Semiotics of Nothing

The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness.

– Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*

#### I. “A Voluptuous Pause”

In *Speak, Memory* (1962), Vladimir Nabokov makes a statement that is seminal to an understanding of his artistic method: “There is also keen pleasure [...] in meeting the riddle of the initial blossoming of man’s mind by postulating a voluptuous pause in the growth of the rest of nature, a lolling and loafing which allowed first of all the formation of *Homo poeticus* – without which *sapiens* could not have been evolved” (298). There are two important elements in this statement that define Nabokov’s artistry. The first element is well known to Nabokov scholars: that is, Nabokov’s insistence on the impossibility of separating fiction from reality – indeed, the very dependence of reality (*Homo sapiens*) upon fiction (*Homo poeticus*). “Reality,” wrote Nabokov in his “Afterword” to *Lolita* (1955), is “one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes” (312); in *Transparent Things* (1972), as well as elsewhere in his novels, this idea is reiterated: “We have shown our need for quotation marks (‘reality,’ ‘dream’)” (93). This notion that *Homo poeticus* generates *Homo sapiens* is analogous to Nabokov’s conception of “reality” in quotation marks; it is an established and defining feature of Nabokov’s writings. The second element of Nabokov’s artistry, which is also articulated in the above statement from *Speak, Memory*, has largely gone unnoticed by Nabokov’s readers: this is that “voluptuous pause” that in the first place enables *Homo poeticus* to construct his world in the figure of *Homo sapiens*. This “voluptuous pause,” which, after all, is the necessary requisite that allows *Homo poeticus* to spin his world-generating words, is, I content, a bountiful nothing – a pure blankness of action and being that permits infinite potential beings. This nothing appears as the essential

element that allows for fictioning (*Homo poeticus*) to take place, thereby generating the world (*Homo sapiens*), in much of Nabokov's writings.

Thus, the present study intends to examine the multifaceted embodiments and signifiers of nothing found in the work of Nabokov, and thereby establish a "semiotics of nothing" that is important to understanding his writings; this "semiotics of nothing" has hitherto been largely overlooked or misunderstood by Nabokov's readers. In particular, I would like to suggest that nothing itself is at the heart of Nabokov's patterning, which is often the gift of the artist or the curse of the madman, but which nevertheless always creates meaning, and, by proxy, worlds. As such, nothing is the generator of narrative (fiction), which is largely synonymous with reality in Nabokov's writings; nothing is therefore essential to the Nabokovian wor(l)d. Ultimately, I propose a new pattern laced throughout Nabokov's writing, a pattern that traces a three-starred constellation comprised of (1) nothing, (2) the artistic genius of *Homo poeticus* (word), and (3) the creation of *Homo sapiens* (world).

I begin this study with a survey of the critical literature that lays the foundation for analyzing nothing in Nabokov's writings. Then, in order to demonstrate the ubiquity of nothing throughout Nabokov's oeuvre, I review nothing's appearance in a wide selection of Nabokov's novels and short stories. This overview sets the stage for close readings of two works: *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), and "Signs and Symbols" (1948). *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* establishes a relationship between nothing and reality (without quotation marks), while "Signs and Symbols" demonstrates how nothing is the catalyzing mechanic of the patterning that is a staple of Nabokov's aesthetics. Throughout this discussion, I demonstrate how various figurations of nothing found throughout Nabokov's work highlight and makes problematic the zone between text, author, and reader, thereby suggesting a symbiotic relationship between word

and world that goes to the heart of Nabokovian narrative. Ultimately, nothing plays an essential role in artistic and physical creation in the narratives of Nabokov.

## II. The Critical Tradition

In general, critics interpret figurations of nothing in Nabokov's work either as signs of an alternative world, or as signs of lost figures, times, or places – as existences that no longer exist. Regarding the former, D. Barton Johnson, in *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* (1985), examines how “many, if not all, of Vladimir Nabokov's novels contain more than one world in varying degrees of presence” (1). According to Johnson, the source of this theme stems back to Russian Symbolism, which had an early impact on Nabokov's aesthetic and philosophical views. The two central ideas of the Symbolists – one, that there exists another, more real world beyond the limits of human intelligence; and two, that art reveals that world – lie at the core of Nabokov's aesthetic cosmology, which Johnson describes as a “two world” model:

Each Nabokov novel contains at least two fictive worlds. This “two world” model accounts (in a formal sense) for much of what happens in many Nabokov novels. It describes their underlying cosmology. The patterns, the webs of coincidence that pervade the world of the characters, are but an imperfect mirroring of events on a second, controlling world. Although the characters of a given universe regard the intuited next higher world as the ultimate, all-defining one, it in turn stands in the same subordinate position vis-à-vis a still more all-encompassing world. (1-2)

This “two world” model gains credence through an assertion Véra Nabokov makes about her late husband's “principal theme” in her Foreword to a 1979 collection of Nabokov's poems. She reveals this theme to be *potustoronnost'*, which literally means “on-that-[other]-side-ness,” and is variously translated as “the hereafter,” “the beyond,” or as the border between life and death.

In *Nabokov's Otherworld* (1991), Vladimir Alexandrov redefines *potustoronnost'* as the "otherworld," and puts forward the notion that an intuition of a transcendent other realm resides at the core of Nabokov's art. Echoing Johnson's ideas about a "two world" model, Alexandrov considers the otherworld to be Nabokov's central theme. His study outlines how the concept of an otherworld shapes Nabokov's metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics. Metaphysically, the otherworld indicates "Nabokov's faith in the apparent existence of a transcendent, nonmaterial, timeless, and beneficent ordering and ordered realm of being that seems to provide for personal immortality and that affects everything that exists in the mundane world" (5). Regarding ethics, Alexandrov says that Nabokov's belief in good and evil is grounded in a faith in the existence of a transcendental other realm. Nabokov's aesthetics are marked by the presence of the otherworld in many aspects: the creation of art requires an attunement to the otherworld, and Nabokov's literary style itself, especially its patterning and allusions, reflects the otherworld's formative role with regard to nature and artifice.

I would like to argue that what Alexandrov interprets as the "otherworld" should instead be interpreted as "nothing." This is not merely a case of splitting hairs over semantics: the gaps, holes, disappearances, absences, voids, and abysses in Nabokov's world (which are typically read as passages to the otherworld) should be understood as actual manifestations of nothing; indeed, as I will demonstrate, they function as nothing. Furthermore, even if we allow that the otherworld is the central theme of Nabokov's writing, it should be noted that the power of the otherworld derives more from its nonexistence in our world, and from its indefinable nature – in short, from its own qualities of nothing – than from its positive elsewhere existence.

A handful of scholars have already pointed out that the otherworld seems related to nothing itself. In particular, the space of the lake in Nabokov's writings is commonly considered

to be an otherworldly realm, but it also functions as a signifier of nothing – that is, as a zero. Many critics identify lakes in Nabokov’s works as liminal realms where one may potentially pass from our world to the otherworld. For instance, Maxim D. Shrayner identifies the lake as one of the main elements of an “otherworldly landscape” in Nabokov’s short story “Cloud, Castle, Lake” (1937); he points to the “unusual expression” of the lake’s water as evidence of the lake’s capacity for “communication between the protagonist and the otherworld” (142). Likewise, Priscilla Meyer highlights three motifs associated with the otherworld, the second of which is “a lake or sea” (6). For example, Hazel Shade (whose name, Meyer points out, derives from Walter Scott’s “Lady of the Lake”) is a liminal character, suspended “between the human world and the spirit world, as well as between human being and poem” (Meyer 14). Hazel commits suicide by drowning in one of three lakes (named Omega, Ozero, and Zero), thereby relinquishing her liminal status and crossing over into the otherworld. The significance of the lakes’ names in relation to the otherworld does not go unnoticed by Meyer: “the subject of Shade’s 999-line poem, Hazel’s suicide and the possibility of another world, is emblemized by the three Os or zeros – the lakes’ three names represent alphabet, lake, and number in that order, indicating the boundary between this world and the otherworld, its infinitude and unknowability” (ibid). Andrew Field also takes note of the zero built into these three lakes’ names, ultimately putting forth the notion that all lakes in Nabokov’s oeuvre signify nothing:

A second good instance of the way in which Nabokov makes Russian necessary to the reader are the names of the three lakes near the campus in one of which Hazel takes her life: Omega, Ozero, and Zero. These are Indian names, Kinbote tells us, which were garbled by the earlier settlers. In fact, there is only one lake, or *ozero* (the Russian word for lake), which corresponds to the glass between Shade and Kinbote, and hence is neatly

set between the other two O-ish obeli (Omega and Zero), which signify the two possibilities after death, nothing and everything – *omega*, the last letter of the Greek alphabet, is a symbol for infinity. (345)

Field's observation of the wordplay inherent in the Russian word for lake (*ozero* = 0/zero) establishes the possibility that all Nabokov's lakes are emblems of nothing, in addition to figuring as otherworldly realms. However, the perception of such wordplay requires a deciphering of a cipher (in this case, the Russian word *ozero*) – the reader must search for alternate and true meanings in the slippery play of words. In this particular case, the wordplay is generated by zeros, which therefore makes nothing into the meaningful message (as zero signifies nothing). Nothing is revealed to be the quality of all lakes in Nabokov's writings; if lakes are realms of the otherworld, then nothing is part and parcel of the otherworld as well.

Stephen H. Blackwell also seems to suggest that nothing itself is related to the otherworld in his study on the significance of gaps and discontinuities in Nabokov's creative and scientific work. In *The Quill and the Scalpel: Nabokov's Art and the Worlds of Science* (2009), Blackwell reconsiders otherworldliness as the "not-yet-known" or the "unknowable" (179); the presence of an invisible, incomprehensible, and transcendent realm asserts the limits of human knowledge, or, put another way, the existence of an unknowable world gives evidence that human experience and knowledge are inherently gappy. Blackwell argues that Nabokov refuses to overlook these gaps in human experience and knowledge, and rather makes them explicit in his scientific study, in his translations, and in his creative art. We are reminded, for instance, of the crucial gap between one genus and another for taxonomic classification; of Nabokov's translation of *Eugene Onegin*, which preserves the blank pages and passages in Pushkin's poem, thereby indicating lines that were lost or that perhaps never existed; and of the countless flaws and inconsistencies

purposely peppered throughout Nabokov's own literary writings. In Blackwell's view, Nabokov's insistence on the gap derives from his belief in the danger of determinism, and from a healthy skepticism toward knowledge that claims to be absolute; Nabokov's characters who fail to acknowledge gaps in their vision (e.g. Hermann, Paduk, Humbert) produce monstrous results as a consequence of their solipsism. On the other hand, acknowledgement of the gap provides the incentive to seek out new meaning: "Science usually points away from its own blind spots; Nabokov wanted instead to celebrate them as places to seek intimations of deeper realities" (Blackwell 168). Like the "voluptuous pause" that enables *Homo poeticus* to generate *Homo sapiens*, the gap allows for new meanings to occur.

The critical literature that focuses on loss as a central creative force in Nabokov's works also provides important groundwork for a study of nothing in Nabokov's writings. In *Nabokov's Early Fiction* (1992), Julian Connolly identifies an early stage of Nabokov's writing in which an obsession with an absent other affects certain characters to such an extent that the absence colors and even, at times, takes over their worlds: "In the first phase he often focuses on protagonists who are absorbed with an absent other – a lost love, a dead child, a missing spouse. This absorption with the other has a pervasive quality, and it can create an emotional or psychological filter through which the entire world is perceived" (3). Connolly examines this phenomenon within the context of Nabokov's exploration of the relationship between self and other. This preoccupation with an absent other, which Connolly identifies as central to Nabokov's earliest writings, speaks not only to the changing and complex relationship between self and other that is found throughout Nabokov's entire literary corpus, but also establishes, as I will demonstrate, an early interest in the creative influence of absence that later becomes an interest in the generative powers of nothing itself. That is, the energy that derives from an experience of absence (the loss

of something that once was) in Nabokov's early works becomes, in Nabokov's later works, an underlying theme of creative nothing (different from a loss, for nothing never was).

Of course, the theme of loss recalls formative biographical details from Nabokov's own life: loss of country, estate, father, extended family, and later, a "private tragedy" – his surrendering of the Russian language. Such incredible loss explains Nabokov's urgent fixation with memory, as demonstrated not only in his autobiography *Speak, Memory* and personal letters, but also in his fictional writings. As a result of loss, at least three consequent trends emerge in Nabokov's works: first, memory takes on creative power, the ability to build and rebuild worlds; second, loss becomes an estranging force (in a Shklovskian sense), thereby allowing one to appreciate and see the past in a "stony stone" way that one would otherwise not perceive had the loss not taken place; and third, loss becomes a catalyst for new language. In short, memory, imagination, perception, experience, creation, and language become a function of loss, not a recuperation of it.<sup>35</sup> What matters for this project is to examine not only how loss is wooed, sometimes agonizingly so, and accepted in Nabokov's works as an engenderer of both worlds and words, but also how a preoccupation with loss transforms into a concern with nothing.

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<sup>35</sup> This is an idea earlier put forward by the critic Michael Wood in his study *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (1994). After describing Nabokov's experience of translating *Lolita* from English to Russian, Wood concludes that loss had a powerfully creative effect on the writer:

Later still, translating his most famous novel into Russian, Nabokov spoke not of luxury, but of deprivation, a long-awaited linguistic springtime that had turned to autumn in his absence. His "marvelous Russian language" had "proved to be non-existent." There are those who agree with this judgment, and those who disagree, and I can't judge at all. What matters, surely, is that Nabokov in the meantime had found, through his very loss, a fabulous, freaky, singing, acrobatic, unheard-of English which (probably) made even his most marvelous Russian seem poor, and therefore meant that the terrible decision of his early years in America had been right, that the second language could flower for him only at the cost of the first; had to become itself a new first language, a language to write in. (5)

In reviewing the critical literature specific to my theme, it becomes apparent that there is a deep concern with the liminal in Nabokov's works, whether it be the space between self and other, as Connolly investigates, or the moments of overlap between our world and another, as explored by Johnson and Alexandrov. To be sure, Nabokov's writings tend to rapturously dwell in the liminal. Be it the fluid borderline between self and other in *The Eye* (1930), *Despair* (1934), and *Ada* (1969), the shadowing of fantasy into reality in *The Defense* (1930), *Invitation to a Beheading* (1936), and *Lolita*, the muddled limits between the public and the private in *Bend Sinister* (1947), the tangled zone between familiar and foreign in *Pnin* (1957), or the indefinite line between self-fictioning and autobiography in *Pale Fire* (1962) and *Speak, Memory*, – Nabokov's work cavorts along these mid-zones, blurring and transgressing these boundaries as it skips along so that the self is displaced to the position of the other, or the familiar and foreign embody a chiasmic structure, and always, *always*, connecting the creative moment and aesthetic power with these liminal positions and tricksteresque transgressions. These liminal realms are various renditions of "reality" in quotation marks; wor(l)d-creating power is seen to come from a liminal realm in Nabokov's writings, which are themselves continually generated by and drawn to these liminalities.

And what is a liminal realm, if not the space of nothing – neither present nor absent, and both present and absent? In his groundbreaking study, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*" (1964), Victor Turner designates the liminal state as a structural – if not physical – invisibility or nonexistence, which is responsible for the liminal's twofold character. The liminal is "at once no longer classified and not yet classified" (96), and is therefore, on the one hand, symbolized by death, corpses, decomposition, menstruation – that which has a negative tinge. But it is also, on the other hand, symbolized by gestation and

parturition, “likened to or treated as embryos, newborn infants, or sucklings” (ibid). The symbolic renderings of the liminal contain within them both the positive and negative aspects of existence due to the fact that the liminal position is structurally not there – it is the nothing in the system. Thus, nothing is the common denominator of all liminal realms. As we will see, a figuration of nothing is repeatedly found at these ubiquitous mid-zones in Nabokov’s narratives. Nothing is often rendered as a hole, gap, or abyss between absence and presence, reality and imagination, or life and death, among other binary oppositions. These figurations of nothing not only straddle opposing realms found in Nabokov’s work; they also instigate artistic genius, and thereby ignite physical and metaphysical creation.

### III. Tracing Nothing Throughout Nabokov’s Narratives

Nothing appears as the generator of narrative, as the instigator of genius and madness, and as the true form of reality (without quotation marks) throughout Nabokov’s work. Aesthetics of nothing, characters that disappear or that do not exist, trauma and passion that are so extreme that they fall beyond signification, textual holes, gaps, abysses, and blind spots – all these are characteristics of Nabokov’s writings. More importantly, they are figurations of a creative nothing, catalysts that engender textual and extra-textual worlds.

Let’s begin by examining the many ways Nabokov’s characters embody or personify nothing, and in doing so demonstrate nothing’s creative power. Nabokov’s novels are often inhabited by central characters who either disappear (that is, escape their author, leave their world for another, die, etc.), or are revealed to be nonexistent. These characters derive great creative power from their embodied nothingness; as such, they function as personifications of nothing’s effects. For example, Smurov, from the novella *The Eye*, is a man who believes he is dead and living an imaginary existence beyond the grave. When it is revealed to Smurov that he

is still very much alive and has never actually died, Smurov's amends his beliefs: it is not that he is dead, but that he does not exist – he is not an absence of being, but nothing. He explains, "I do not exist: there exist but the thousands of mirrors that reflect me. With every acquaintance I make, the population of phantoms resembling me increases. Somewhere they live, somewhere they multiply. I alone do not exist" (103). It is because Smurov exists as nothing itself that a never-ending yarn of stories about Smurov can be told, that an infinite number of images reflecting him can proliferate; his nothingness lets loose *Homo poeticus*, who generates the various versions of Smurov as a *Homo sapien*. Here, we have also stumbled upon an allegory of language's semantics: the familiar tale of the gap between the signifier and the signified, or the nonexistent signified, that allows for meaning to exist and proliferate. Smurov is, quite literally, the nothing as the transcendental signified that "thousands of mirrors reflect," or that thousands of signifiers signify. He engenders stories by virtue of his nothingness, just as the gaps in language engender meaning.

In *Invitation to a Beheading*, we find another nonexistent being in the character Cincinnatus, a young man who sits in a cell and awaits his execution, condemned to death for the ambiguous crime of "gnostical turpitude" (72). His crime is so "rare and unutterable" that it requires linguistic circumlocutions: it is otherwise known as his "translucence" and "opacity" (21), or his "impenetrability" and "occlusion" (72). These details point to something in Cincinnatus that is incapable of being circumscribed because of its extremity, or because of its nonexistence. Like descriptions of phenomena that cannot be described either because they are not there (nothing) or because they are too much (infinity), Cincinnatus likewise defies description. He is a thoroughly ambiguous being, both overwhelmingly present and utterly

absent at the same time. This presence combined with absence is particularly apparent when the narrator attempts to describe Cincinnatus, the picture of whom “is difficult to put into words”:

[...] of the light outline of his lips, seemingly not quite fully drawn but touched by a master of masters; of the fluttering movements of his empty, not-yet-shaded-in hands; of the dispersing and again gathering rays in his animated eyes; but even all of this, analyzed and studied, still could not fully explain Cincinnatus: it was as if one side of his being slid into another dimension, as all the complexity of a tree’s foliage passes from shade into radiance, so that you cannot distinguish just where begins the submergence into the shimmer of a different element. (121)

Cincinnatus is described as a liminal being, partially residing in his cell and partially residing in another, unknown dimension. This accounts for his hazy and ghostly features (e.g. his “not-yet-shaded-in hands,” rays that both disperse and gather in his eyes, lips only partially drawn), and the sense that part of him does not exist, at least not in the “true” space of the novel.

It is, however, this non-existent part of Cincinnatus that is the most powerful and immanent. In various scenes Cincinnatus strips himself of his presence to dwell in the “eternal” and “free” nothing of his being. For instance:

He stood up and took off the dressing gown, the skullcap, the slippers. He took off the linen trousers and shirt. He took off his head like a toupee, took off his collarbones like shoulder straps, took off his rib cage like a hauberk. He took off his hips and his legs, he took off his arms like gauntlets and threw them in a corner. What was left of him gradually dissolved, hardly coloring the air. At first Cincinnatus simply reveled in the coolness; then, fully immersed in his secret medium, *he began freely and happily to ...* (32, emphasis mine)

The ellipsis that punctuates the passage's end is not to be read as an interruption; it is to be read as a signifier of nothing. Ellipses are a favorite punctuation of Nabokov, often appearing when the text reaches the limits of signification. Whether humorously signifying something that no longer exists ("To the lady who has lost her right hand: I kiss your ellipsis" ["Ultima Thule," 1939-1940, 500]), or signifying a trauma that cannot be put into words ("I happened to glimpse from the bathroom, through a chance combination of mirror aslant and door ajar, a look on her face ... that look I cannot exactly describe ... an expression of helplessness so perfect [...] [Lolita 283]), the ellipses in Nabokov's work are often expressions of nothing and the unsayable. Thus, when Cincinnatus begins "freely and happily to ...", he begins to freely and happily nonexistent as nothing – a state of being that his language cannot express. We find this ellipsis reiterated later in the novel when Cincinnatus describes this process of divestment of his presence:

I am taking off layer after layer, *until at last* ... I do not know how to describe it, but I know this: through the process of gradual divestment I reach the final, indivisible, firm, radiant point, and this point says: I am! like a pearl ring embedded in a shark's gory fat – O my eternal, *my eternal* ... and this point is enough for me – actually nothing more is necessary. (90, emphasis mine)

Once again, we should read the ellipses in the above passage not as moments when the thought is cut off, but as the only way Cincinnatus can express the state of nothing that he comes to embody. It is this nothing that he regards as his eternal and as his true.

The chessmaster Luzhin of *The Defense* (1930) is another such character that personifies nothing. With a forgettable face "like a pale spot" (31), Luzhin absorbs himself in the world of chess. When his wife eventually forbids him the game, a palpable void is left in Luzhin's world,

“for what else exists in the world besides chess? Fog, the unknown, **non-being** ...” (139). Again, the ellipsis shows up when the text needs to articulate nothing itself. He begins to interpret the world around him to be one huge chess game, and to the outside world he suffers from a madness that is similar to the referential mania of “Signs and Symbols” (I discuss this fully in my section on the short story, found later in this chapter). Like the boy in “Signs and Symbols,” Luzhin also attempts to escape by tearing a hole in his world, which he quite literally does. He breaks a “black, star-shaped hole” in his window (254), and manages to throw himself into the chasm below. The novel ends with his friends and family crying out to him, but there is no one left to cry out to: “there was no Aleksandr Ivanovich [Luzhin]” (256). To combat the void of existence, Luzhin constructs a world in which everything is part of a chess game; the void inspires his madness, but it is madness that has the power to create worlds. His disappearance by the novel’s end is his full solipsism into the world he himself created out of nothing.

Another way that Nabokov marks his characters with nothingness is through the use of unreliable narrators. One of the best examples of this is found in the novel *Pnin*, which is composed by a narrator who writes from the perspective of omniscience even though he is merely an acquaintance of Pnin. Moreover, Pnin considers the narrator to be a “dreadful inventor” (185), a man who consistently lies about Pnin’s life. The narrator’s unreliability is corroborated by many contradictions and plothes in the text.<sup>36</sup> The narrative of *Pnin*, then, repeatedly draws attention to itself as a fabrication and falsehood; if we have been careful readers, we cannot believe what we have been told about the character Pnin. That is, the narrative increasingly erases the reality of Pnin by virtue of its inconsistencies and illuminated falsities; the subject of *Pnin* turns out to be no subject at all – that is, nothing. He is an

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<sup>36</sup> See Lawrence L. Lee’s *Vladimir Nabokov*, p. 127, and David H. Richter’s “Narrative Entrapment in *Pnin* and ‘Signs and Symbols,’” p. 425.

impossible and nonexistent character, not unlike the “impossible butterfly” that graces a book cover in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (37).

We find this erasure also operating in the plotline of *Pnin*: the narrative line of the novel is composed of a string of cancelled happenings and averted incidents. The narrative repeatedly sets up Pnin for some sort of mishap or tragedy, or braces its readers for some kind of disaster, all of which are always avoided in the end. David H. Richter dubs this narrative device “the interrupted pratfall,” and explains: “*Pnin*, like *Lolita*, is constructed around a single device of narrative entrapment – arousal and frustration – which is played out, like variations on a theme, again and again” (420). An “interrupted pratfall” is another way of describing a “foiled” plot; of course, “to foil” means to bring a scheme or effort to naught. Nabokov’s plots, then, are often plots that are naught-ward; the naught-ward plot heads toward its lodestone nothing, and in doing so generates narrative. This is immediately apparent in *Pnin*, as Richter point out. For instance, in the novel’s first chapter, Pnin gets on the wrong train with the wrong paper to deliver a lecture to the Women’s Club at Cremona. The chapter piles error upon error, but the expected culminating tragedy is never delivered; instead, everything turns out fine. In Chapter 6 the narrative leads us to momentarily believe that Pnin has broken the bowl his stepson gave him; but after a small taste of Pnin’s anguish, the bowl is revealed to be unharmed:

He looked very old, with his toothless mouth half open and a film of tears dimming his blank unblinking eyes. Then, with a moan of anguished anticipation, he went back to the sink and, bracing himself, dipped his hand in the foam. A jagger of glass stung him. Gently he removed a broken goblet. The beautiful bowl was intact. He took a fresh dish towel and went on with his household work. (172-73)

Again and again, the narrative sets up certain expectations in the reader, and then fails to fulfill those expectations. Anticipation is ignited, and then extinguished. This naught-ward plot that moves forward via cancelled happenings and “interrupted pratfalls” is another way in which narrative worlds are born of nothing in Nabokov’s works. We find many examples, beginning with Nabokov’s debut novel *Mary* (1926). *Mary* constructs its main narrative thread upon Ganin’s all-consuming desire to see Mary after years of separation, only to culminate with his decision not to meet Mary at the train station after all. Significantly, at the very beginning of *Mary*’s action, attention is drawn to an interesting sign on a bathroom wall: “two crimson naughts deprived of the rightful digits with which they had once denoted two Sundays on Herr Dorn’s desk calendar” (6). These naughts foreshadow the ultimate direction of the plot: a reunion that will not happen, or an occurrence of nothing. However, these are the very naughts that propel the narrative forward. Their association with Sunday is significant in this regard, as Sunday is the day of the “voluptuous pause,” asserts Nabokov in *Speak, Memory*. Along these lines, he writes, “Toilers of the world, disband! Old books are wrong. The world was made on a Sunday” (298). *Mary* is the narrative world created by those Sunday naughts, driven toward that nothing finale that actually releases Ganin from his imprisoning preoccupation with the past, and launches him on a spontaneous adventure, to the sea (another kind of nothing, should we put it in the same camp as lakes in Nabokov’s oeuvre, as many scholars do).

Another naught-ward plot culminates in the final chapter of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: the narrator believes he has arrived, just in the nick of time, at his dying half-brother’s bedroom door; however, he is later told that the man sleeping behind the door is not his brother, and that Sebastian is already dead. Like *Mary*, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* also opens with two interesting details that point to a formative nothing that resides at the plot’s origin, and

toward which the plot is pulled: (1) “Sebastian Knight was born on the thirty-first of December, 1899, in the former capital of my country,” and (2) a reference to a mysterious Russian woman who keeps a diary, “Olga Olegovna Orlova – an egg-like alliteration which it would have been a pity to withhold” (3). The first detail places the origin of the narrative right at the cusp, at the liminal moment between two centuries, and in a capital that is, in the present time of the narrative, no longer a capital. The origin of Sebastian is therefore marked by a liminal quality, and by a sense of erasure. The second detail – Olga Olegovna Orlova – is quite surprising, considering the fact that this character has no particular function in the plot. For some unknown reason, the narrator has access to her diary, which describes the day Sebastian was born. Most compelling about this Olga is the three Os of her name, which again evoke a sense of origin in their “egg-like alliteration,” but moreover may be read as three zeros, similar to the three lakes in *Pale Fire*, Omega, Ozero, and Zero. As such, Sebastian’s origin takes place during a liminal time in a “former” place, and is narrated by a woman whose name evokes a signifier of nothing. From the very beginning, Sebastian is enveloped with a sense of nothingness, a nothingness that drives the plot forward toward the finale in which the narrator’s expectations are disappointed, brought to nothing.

Nabokov also carefully places the space of nothing – the abyss – in a number of important moments throughout his oeuvre. Most striking, to my mind, is the abyss that appears at the end of *Lolita*. Humbert Humbert describes a day, sometime after Lolita’s disappearance, when he went walking off the side of the highway and approached a “friendly abyss” (307). It is from the lip of this abyss that he hears the sounds of children playing: “I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for background, and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s

absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord” (308). Humbert Humbert comprehends the meaning of his crime as he stands at the edge of an abyss, as if truth accompanies this glimpse of spatial nothingness: the abyss filled with the sounds of child’s play produces the meaningful revelation. In *Pale Fire* the image of an abyss appears again, this time as the signifier of death that John Shade devotes his life to exploring: “And finally there was that sleepless night / When I decided to explore and fight / The foul, the inadmissible abyss, / Devoting all my life to this / One task” (39). His poem is built upon this exploration of death’s abyss; again, the abyss is foundational to the construction of the narrative. Luzhin of *The Defense* paints a “train on a bridge spanning an abyss” (208), which is similar to the image of a “cradle [that] rocks above an abyss” (19) that opens Nabokov’s autobiography *Speak, Memory*; both images draw attention to the paradoxical presence of the abyss in existence, which both holds up and threatens the existence held above it.

Finally, nothingness of some kind nearly always materializes at the end of Nabokov’s novels and stories. These various manifestations of nothingness found in his finales always serve to complicate and blur the lines between word and world. Examples abound: the finale of *Invitation to a Beheading*, in which the criminal Cincinnatus decides that he doesn’t want to believe in his execution any longer, and as he walks away from the beheading block, the entire world is revealed to be unreal, and thus disintegrates; the unplanned eleventh chapter of *Despair*, in which the (once again) criminal narrator pens himself an escape from the police; the end of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, in which the unnamed narrator decides that he can be his dead brother – the famous author Sebastian Knight – since there is no real existence, and thereby steps into the position of the creative void; the final chapter of *Pnin*, in which Pnin narrowly escapes his author; the last moments of *The Defense*, in which Luzhin defenestrates himself and

vanishes; the concluding passages of *The Eye*, in which Smurov ecstatically reveals that he does not exist; the finale of *Bend Sinister*, in which the world around the protagonist Krug dims and becomes translucent and then vanishes, leaving nothing but Nabokov sitting amidst the papers of his novel; the ending of “Vasiliy Shishkov” (1939), in which the poet Shishkov seemingly “disappears and dissolves” into his own art; or the finale of *Ada*, in which Ada and Van Veen “die, as it were, *into* the finished book” (587) not unlike Shishkov. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but certainly demonstrates a productive pattern in Nabokov’s literature: exemplars of nothing that deconstructs the binary between fiction and reality or character and author, and that enable the ultimate creative projects of Nabokov’s various heroes.

#### IV. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941): Nothing as the Real

Given Nabokov’s characteristic approach to “reality,” the title of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* immediately poses a kind of riddle. For what is real in Nabokov’s writings can only be approximated, only makes sense when accompanied by quotation marks; reality without quotation marks is evasive, unsayable, difficult (if not impossible) to know, and perhaps no more than a pipe dream. What the title of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* suggests, then, is that the *real* story of Sebastian Knight to be unfolded is a story that is inherently impossible to tell because it does not exist. There is no real story; instead, there is only a “real” story, which is an altogether different matter. Likewise, Sebastian Knight is a blind spot, a nothingness, around which the narrative circulates, and from which the narrative is spun. The novel can thus be read as a story about nothing, and as an allegory of nothing’s creative powers that produce the storied world – that is, “reality.” It is also an extended parable about reality (without quotation marks) as nothing itself.

The famous writer Sebastian Knight is the deceased half-brother of the novel's unnamed narrator, who sets before himself the task of discovering and writing the real story of his enigmatic sibling. What emerges throughout this project, however, is a greater mystery than the one that initially sparks the narrative. By the novel's end, the portrait of the real Sebastian Knight is a repeatedly-erased blank canvas: all we know about him is an abundance of self-canceling and untrustworthy anecdotes, passages from his fiction that may or may not be autobiographical, and memories of him that yield not much more than a void.

Indeed, those moments in the text that come closest to grasping the reality of Sebastian Knight always find themselves face to face with a type of nothingness. For instance, when the narrator sifts through his childhood memories for information about his half-brother, he comes up empty-handed:

I have endeavored to form a coherent picture of what I saw of my half-brother in those childhood days of mine, between say 1910 (my first year of consciousness) and 1919 (the year he left for England). But the task eludes me. Sebastian's image does not appear as part of my boyhood, thus subject to endless selection and development, nor does it appear as a succession of familiar visions, but it comes to me in a few bright patches, as if he were not a constant member of our family, but some erratic visitor passing across a lighted room and then for a long interval fading into the night. (15-16)

For those familiar with Nabokov's notions about memory, and its ability to not only resurrect the past, but to also cause the past to be experienced in a more meaningful way than it was initially lived,<sup>37</sup> the above passage is quite telling; the narrator's memory largely fails to bring to light

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<sup>37</sup> For example, in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov discusses the "supreme achievement of memory, which is the masterly use it makes of innate harmonies when gathering to its fold the suspended and wandering tonalities of the past" (170). In other words, the past wanders without memory; memory draws patterns

anything of significance regarding Sebastian. Unless, of course, the significance of his memory is precisely that Sebastian often does not appear, except for in small, flickering patches. Memory, then, that has the power to capture the meaning of the past, reveals the reality of Sebastian to be a highly evasive and non-appearing figure – he is literally nothing in the narrator’s memory. The other main images of the above passage are related to light, (“bright patches,” and a “visitor passing across a lighted room”), and gain meaning when we compare them to another paragraph in which the narrator describes early memories of his half-brother:

I remember Sebastian as a boy, six years my senior, gloriously messing about with water-colors in the homely aura of a stately kerosene lamp whose pink silk shade seems painted by his own very wet brush, now that it glows in my memory. (14)

The image of the physical lamp being created through Sebastian’s brush strokes presents a metaphor for the way in which art constructs the “reality” around it (again, *Homo poeticus* creates *Homo sapiens*). The material lamp is fashioned by the artist’s painting in the glowing canvas of the narrator’s memory. Returning to the earlier cited passage, we recall the narrator’s memory is again aglow, and that there Sebastian is the one flickering in bright patches. The idea is thus put forward that Sebastian, like the lamp, is also the creation of the artist, illuminated by the narrator’s imagination. We may conclude, then, that the “real” Sebastian Knight is created by the narrator’s memory, and that a real Sebastian Knight outside of the narrator’s memory does not exist. Hence we have the dual imagery of a nonexistent brother, and a brother who only exists in the glimmers of memory’s light. Sebastian himself is nothing, rendered into being through the imagination of the narrator.

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through one’s past, and therefore makes harmonies – or meaning – out of one’s past. Without memory, the past is suspended in perpetual drifting: formless, inharmonious.

Sebastian is also rendered into being through his own writings, which are quoted extensively throughout the novel, and even at times usurp the main narrative thread. The narrator utilizes Sebastian's novels to fill in the gaps in his biographical research and memory, and in so doing, relies once again upon art to give form and meaning to his half-brother. But Sebastian's prose has its own unique properties that complicate the matter: the narrator describes it as "a dazzling succession of gaps" (33). What paradoxically gives form and distinction to Sebastian's writing are moments of nothingness, spectacular withholdings of images, language, and ideas. For instance, as the narrator is writing about Sebastian dying, he turns to Sebastian's last novel, *The Doubtful Asphodel*, which describes a dying man. In the place of an account of Sebastian's final days we are instead given Sebastian's writing – a story about an unknown man (character gap), in an unknown place (spatial gap), a man who regrets much that he did not do and did not see and did not say (gaps of experience), and who knows the "absolute solution" to all of life's mysteries and meaning, but at the last moment hesitates to give it, and thus dies without delivering the ultimate truth (Gap). Writes the narrator:

The man is dead and we do not know. The asphodel on the other shore is as doubtful as ever. We hold a dead book in our hands. Or are we mistaken? I sometimes feel when I turn the pages of Sebastian's masterpiece that the "absolute solution" is there, somewhere, concealed in some passage I have read too hastily, or that it is intertwined with other words whose familiar guise deceived me. I don't know any other book that gives one this special sensation, and perhaps this was the author's special intention. (178)

The narrator neglects to realize that the book he himself is composing is exactly like Sebastian's masterpiece: a novel teeming with gaps, and thematically about the real life (the so-called "absolute solution"), which it ultimately fails to deliver – or does it? If reality does not exist

except within quotation marks, then the novel's inability to depict the real life of Sebastian Knight is exactly the deliverance of the title's promise, just as the dying man's hesitation to speak the "absolute solution" is not a hesitation at all, but actually the solution itself – there is no absolute solution. That a great deal of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is composed of Sebastian's fiction once again affirms the view that art gives form to Sebastian's "reality"; moreover, because Sebastian's prose is stylistically gappy, there is also the notion that Sebastian comes into being from these moments in the structure (world or text) in which nothing exists. The narrator's use of Sebastian's gappy prose to give shape to his account of Sebastian furthers the idea that a real (that is, real without quotation marks) Sebastian does not exist, and that instead, only a "real" Sebastian exists in the realm of imagination.

Still, the novel does in fact deliver a great wealth of information about Sebastian; however, it is not information that is instrumental to understanding his being. Writes the narrator, "I could perhaps describe the way he walked, or laughed or sneezed, but all this would be no more than sundry bits of cinema-film cut away by scissors and have nothing in common with the essential drama" (16). That is, those details fail to tell us about the true man behind the walk, the laugh, or the sneeze. Likewise, Sebastian's stepmother reiterates the narrator's feelings: she knows much about Sebastian, but does not know the person himself. "I've always felt [...] that I never really knew Sebastian, I knew he obtained good marks at school, read an astonishing number of books, was clean in his habits, insisted on taking a cold bath every morning although his lungs were none too strong, – I knew all this and more, but he himself escaped me" (28-29). There is a strong feeling in both their accounts that the real essence of Sebastian is elusive and unknowable. Furthermore, the various interviews that the narrator makes also disappoint: rather than supplying a reliable picture of his half-brother, at best they deliver caricatured or overly-

sentimental images of Sebastian, and at worst they shed a biased and/or critical light on Sebastian's peripheries – colleagues, ex-lovers, former schoolmates, and acquaintances. At one point during his rounds of interviews, the narrator muses to himself, “For a minute, the object of my coming seemed to me madly absurd. Somehow, too, I remembered Chichikov's round of weird visits in Gogol's *Dead Souls*” (141). This reference to Gogol's work suggests a kinship between the narrator and Chichikov, and by proxy an affiliation between their respective quests. Chichikov journeys the Russian countryside with plans to purchase dead souls from landowners, and the narrator travels through Europe hoping to acquire information about his half-brother. The reference to Chichikov suggests that like the dead souls, the information that the narrator garners about Sebastian essentially amounts to nothing.

Here, it is illuminating to recall Nabokov's lecture on Gogol's *Dead Souls*, which adds further meaning to the narrator's spontaneous self-association with Chichikov and his relationship to nothing. In this lecture, Nabokov highlights a conversation between two Russian *muzhiks*, wherein they discuss the wheels on Chichikov's *britzka*. Of these *muzhiks* and their conversation, Nabokov comments, “They impersonate the remarkable creative faculty of Russians, so beautifully disclosed by Gogol's own inspiration, of working in a void. [...] The speculation of the two *muzhiks* is based on nothing tangible and leads to no material results; but philosophy and poetry are born that way [...]” (18-19). Nabokov emphasizes Gogol's artistic inspiration as the void, as “speculation [...] based on nothing” – as many other readers and critics of Gogol have also noted.<sup>38</sup> Andrei Bely, for example, was especially interested in the figure O that proliferates throughout Gogol's narratives, reading in Gogol's predilection for Os a

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<sup>38</sup> See Andrei Bely's *Мастерство Гоголя* (1996), Gary Saul Morson's “Gogol's Parables of Explanation: Nonsense and Prosaics” (1992), and Sven Spieker's “Introduction: The Presence of Absence in Gogol” (1999).

concern with nothingness and absence.<sup>39</sup> Gogol himself was known for an infatuation with zero, immortalized by an unusual signature he inscribed on one of his earliest published works: four circles penned in a row, which has variously been interpreted as the four Os contained within his full name (Nikolai V. Gogol-Yankowsky), or, conversely, as four zeros.<sup>40</sup> The former interpretation highlights the O present within the artist, and credits these Os as that which creates the text – as Gogol’s peculiar signature implies. The latter interpretation (four zeroes) likewise grants artistic credit to a figuration of nothing. Given Gogol’s own concern with the creative void, and Nabokov’s acknowledgement of Gogol’s texts that “[work] in a void,” thereby giving birth to philosophy and poetry from “nothing tangible” and “speculation [...] based on nothing,” the narrator’s recollection of Chichikov reinforces his own relationship with creative nothingness.

Indeed, when we examine the matter further, we find that both the narrator and Chichikov are themselves embodiments of nothing that search for nothing (i.e. dead souls; the real life of Sebastian Knight). Many critics have read Chichikov as nothing itself personified, and *Dead Souls* as a text in which both its characters and its readers are invited to contemplate and interpret nothing – that is, to create meaning out of nothing.<sup>41</sup> The narrator’s feeling of affinity between himself and Chichikov likely has to do with Chichikov’s lack of special abilities, and Gogol’s reliance on circumlocutions when describing his hero – Gogol is never quite able to straightforwardly place his pen upon Chichikov. Likewise, the narrator of *Sebastian Knight* is never quite able to place his own pen upon himself: he admittedly tries to stay outside of the narrative, but undermines this desire by repeatedly drawing our attention to the fact that he is absent from it. For instance, the narrator frequently withholds his name from his readers. Other

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<sup>39</sup> See Bely (245-53).

<sup>40</sup> See Spieker (6-7).

<sup>41</sup> See Morson (216).

characters pointedly ask the narrator what his name is, and the narrator does not write his response; other times, he writes, ““My name is so-and-so”” (140), or allows Sebastian to refer to him as V. (69). That the narrator is unnamed hints at his own characteristic nothingness, much like Chichikov. Furthermore, the narrator’s deliberate attempt to “put into this book as little of [his] own self as possible” (139), and his non-appearance in Mr. Goodman’s biography on Sebastian Knight (“to readers of Goodman’s book I am bound to appear non-existent – a bogus relative, a garrulous impostor” [4]), attest to the idea that the narrator himself does not exist, or at least wants to appear nonexistent. It is an interesting paradox that the narrator is exhibiting: having decided not to put himself in the text, he keeps reminding us that he is not there, and in doing so actually inserts himself into the text in the form of a non-appearing and self-erasing character.

That the narrator is moreover the writer of the text indicates that the narrative is written from a space that has been marked with nothing; this parallels the notion that nothing is a creative narrative force. When, at the end of the novel, the narrator declares that he himself is Sebastian Knight, he may do so because he has no identity or existence of his own, and can therefore be anyone. Again, this is similar to Chichikov, whose own empty character gives him the ability to perform a multiplicity of identities, and also allows him to be what people most want him to be – be it an incognito Napoleon, or a man with no limbs. The unnamed, uncharacterized narrator of Nabokov’s novel can be Sebastian Knight precisely because he himself is nothing. That the writer of the novel is purposely marked as nonexistent draws attention to the connection between nothing and the creative force. He can write the “real life” of Sebastian Knight, and he can be Sebastian Knight – writing and being become one and the same, produced by nothing. We can say, then, that *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is about a

nonexistent character (Sebastian Knight) written by a nonexistent author (the narrator), and demonstrates how a real life that exists outside of quotation marks is also nonexistent. Writer, character, and theme all bring us back to nothing.

Thus, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* puts forward the notion that reality without quotation marks is literally nothing, and that the only existing existence is “reality,” which is generated through imagination – that is, *fiction is the only existing reality*. We find this symbiotic connection between reality and nothing elsewhere in Nabokov’s literary corpus. We have already discussed Smurov and Cincinnatus, both of whom experience a reality of their being in a state of nothingness. Nabokov returns to this theme in “Ultima Thule,” the first chapter of his unfinished Russian novel. “Ultima Thule” presents an early rendition of Sebastian Knight’s final novel *The Doubting Asphodel*: in this chapter, Nabokov tells the story of Ilya Falter, who is struck by lightning one evening, and, as a result, has “accidentally solved ‘the riddle of the universe’” (509). The narrator begs Falter to tell him this “Truth with a capital T that comprises in itself the explanation and the proof of all possible mental affirmations” (515), but Falter repeatedly refuses the narrator’s entreaties, fearing that the information would crush him, as it has crushed others. However, on his deathbed, Falter sends the narrator a message, in which it appears he has conveyed this ultimate truth of existence, only to black out those lines that contain the answer. Like Sebastian’s protagonist of *The Doubtful Asphodel*, the real truth of being is brought to the lip of a deathbed, only to be taken into darkness and silence at the last moment. Or is it? Can it not be that the blacked-out answer *is* the capital-T Truth that Falter speaks of, that, in other words, a figuration of “no answer” or of nothing is indeed the answer to the riddle of existence? That this scene is reiterated in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* testifies to its significance in Nabokov’s work. When Nabokov directly approaches reality without quotation marks, or Truth

with a capital T, he delivers silence and blackness – renderings of nothing itself. These renderings of nothing should not be read as Nabokov taunting his readers, but rather as his way of answering the puzzle: the real life, the capital-T Truth – these do not exist outside of imagination, or, they are literally nothing.

We find this connection between nothing and reality in *Ada* as well. Often, characters relate their real being or real life to various emblems of nothing. For instance, “[...] so struck was [Demon] by the wonder of that brief abyss of absolute reality between two bogus fulgurations of fabricated life” (12); in Ada’s own words, ““In ‘real’ life we are creatures of chance in an absolute void – unless we be artists ourselves, naturally”” (426); and in the words of Lucette, ““I’m like Dolores – when she says she is ‘only a picture painted on air’”” (464). In each instance, the person in question connects his or her essential nature or the reality around them with a figuration of nothingness – abyss, void, or air. Like the narrator of *Sebastian Knight*, when they catch a glimpse of the real essence of things, they are given a vision of nothing.

Ultimately, we can designate two forms of reality in the writings of Nabokov. There is reality without quotation marks – an immanent, capital-R Real or capital-T Truth that does not exist, and is therefore nothing. And there is “reality” within quotation marks – the “reality” we create through our various meaning-making systems such as patterning and imagination. “Reality” is what exists in Nabokov’s works; when he peels away those quotation marks and looks at reality laid bare, he finds a void, an abyss, a blacked-out answer, a death-bed message that is silenced, and an absence of meaning. However, it is due to reality’s nothingness that a plurality of “realities” can and do exist, and that artistic beauty and meaning can be made. In the next section, I demonstrate just how Nabokov’s method of making meaning is dependent upon the nothingness of reality itself.

## V. “Signs and Symbols” (1948): Patterning and Nothing

“Signs and Symbols,” despite its short length (it amounts to a modest six pages in my edition), contains a close examination of a patterning (and therefore, meaning-making) mechanism, analogues of which are found in nearly every one of Nabokov’s works. This mechanism, known as “referential mania,” has nothing at its very core. A careful reading of “Signs and Symbols” illustrates how the patterning produced by referential mania constructs both meaning and madness; moreover, the essence of both this meaning and madness is nothing. The following discussion shows how nothing functions and appears in this story, as well as how it makes possible the creative moment. I then turn to a close analysis of referential mania, which operates by means of this nothing. Throughout this analysis, I look at the various versions of referential mania that are found in Nabokov’s other works, and that together figure as the dominant aesthetic paradigm throughout his literary corpus.

When we strip away the language, imagery, and symbolism of “Signs and Symbols,” and analyze only the skeletal plot structure, what we find is a series of canceled happenings, thwarted wills, and *almost* incidents that *always* end at nothing – another example of a naught-ward narrative. Most basically, the short story covers one day in which a number of nullified events occur: an émigré couple want to bring a birthday present to their mentally deranged son, but are turned away because the boy attempted to commit suicide earlier that day, and their presence may further trouble him; later that night, the husband makes plans to take his son out of the mental institution, but is interrupted by three telephone calls; the first two telephone calls are wrong numbers, and the phone rings a third time just as the narrative closes, thereby “signing” the ending with a call that is never picked up, or a textual and symbolic abyss. Even minor events in the story are marked by nullification: for instance, the train loses its “life current” as the

couple are on their way to the sanitarium (598); the husband wants to unlock his door, but realizes that his wife has taken the key with her; he wants to sleep, but cannot. What we have here is a plot that follows an equation that may be best described as *will to do "x" + but "y" = 0(x)*; or, in other words, it is nothing and zeroing in the most literal sense that move the story along. The zeroed event nonetheless pushes the story forward, which indicates that while "will to do x" was reduced to nothing, the story has still moved to a new position not despite, but because of this deletion. It turns out that these canceled aspirations and incidents do not merely create, but their tracings also form a line that draws attention to the value and power of the nothing in the text.

Furthermore, nothing and negation distinguish the characterization of the central characters: a triad of husband, wife, and son, none of whom are named. Their anonymity is heightened by the fact that other, minor characters *are* given names; for instance, Mrs. Sol, the next-door neighbor who is only mentioned in a parenthetical aside, the psychiatrist, Herman Brink, who writes of their son's disease in a scientific journal, a stranger on the bus who resembles an old friend Rebecca Borisovna, or even Charlie, the person that the mistaken caller repeatedly asks for, as well as many others (Aunt Rosa, Dr. Solov, Elsa). Those who do have names cannot really be called characters, as they are all only fleetingly mentioned, never make actual appearances in the narrative, and have no real bearing on the story other than to highlight the nameless-ness and vacuity of the central figures. Nabokov therefore peppers this story with a number of unseen characters who nevertheless do have names in order to construct a sharp dichotomy against the central characters who remain anonymous. Moreover, it is these named absences (Mrs. Sol and company) that define through contrast the unnamed and ghostly presences (husband, wife, son). Here, for example, is how the story introduces husband and wife:

Her drab gray hair was done anyhow. She wore cheap black dresses. Unlike other women of her age (such as Mrs. Sol, their next-door neighbor, whose face was all pink and mauve with paint and whose hat was a cluster of brookside flowers), she presented a naked white countenance to the fault-finding light of spring days. Her husband, who in the old country had been a fairly successful businessman, was now wholly dependent on his brother Isaac, a real American of almost forty years standing. They seldom saw him and had nicknamed him “the Prince” (598).

In the above passage, Nabokov describes both husband and wife in terms that tell us more about who they are not, than about who they are. The wife is *unlike* women of her age, is *anything but* Mrs. Sol, who is characterized with an overabundance of bright colors and clustered flowers that resonates in her name, and whose excess is even more firmly established by the run-on sentence in which she is animated. Likewise, the husband is characterized by what he used to be, but no longer is (a sort of characterization by erasure), and also by his dependence upon his brother who is significantly doubly named (Isaac and “the Prince”), and mostly absent. Second, those attributes that are given to the wife – “drab gray hair,” “cheap black dresses,” “naked white countenance” – together imply a being that is ghostly, insipid, and deathlike, which further imbues the wife with an aura of nothingness. In regards to the husband’s appearance, other passages underscore his toothless mouth, his “horrible *masklike* grimace” as if he lacks a human face (italics mine, 600), the silence that seems to accompany him wherever he goes, and his preference for “the old overcoat with the astrakhan collar” (601), which subtly associates him with one of the most famous nothings in all of Russian literature, Akaky Akakievich. In sum, husband and wife appear in “Signs and Symbols” as nothings that have taken center-stage; it is

nullification that characterizes both husband and wife, and that saturates the contours of their nonexistent beings.

Their son – the figure that is the narrative’s central catalyst – is even more nonexistent than his parents. He never makes an appearance; in his stead stands a discussion of his illness. Defined as “referential mania,” his disease is distinguished by a perception of patterns and phenomena that are (seemingly) not there, but highly conspired and meaningful:

In these very rare cases the patient imagines that everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and existence. He excludes real people from the conspiracy – because he considers himself to be so much more intelligent than other men. Phenomenal nature shadows him wherever he goes. Clouds in the staring sky transmit to one another, by means of slow signs, incredibly detailed information regarding him. His inmost thoughts are discussed at nightfall, in manual alphabet, by darkly gesticulating trees. Pebbles or stains or sun flecks form patterns representing in some awful way messages which he must interpret. *Everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme* (599, italics mine).

We should pause here to recollect the multi-faceted meanings of the term “cipher,” which variously signifies a code or secret message, and zero. These meanings are simultaneously relevant here. Regarding the former, the boy’s mania is marked by these ciphers as cryptograms, and by the notion that he must uncover the secret of their message. With this definition, the sentence translates to read, “Everything is a cryptogram, and of everything he is the theme of the cryptogram’s message.” Regarding the latter, the answer to the code is repeatedly revealed to be a zero, which enables and personifies not only the boy’s mania, but also the various contours of the story (character development and plotline), as demonstrated above. With this second

definition, the sentence translates to “Everything is zero and of everything he is the theme (which is also zero).” The cipher is both the secret message and the zero – or meaning and meaninglessness. In “Signs and Symbols,” the son himself represents the gap at the center of the story that catalyzes not only the text (the story is, after all, about him), but also the world around him: the world of the story very much reflects the vision of his mania, as discussed by many critics.<sup>42</sup>

“Signs and Symbols,” then, is a story of the world produced by the son’s referential mania: hence the “zeroing” of the plot, and the nothingness of the central characters, both of which are symptoms of a world that has nothing as its theme and creative force. These ideas come to a brilliant point in the final scene of the story, when the phone rings for a second time. The wife tells the young voice on the other end of the line, ““You have the incorrect number. I will tell you what you are doing: you are turning the letter *O* instead of the zero”” (602). It is through the wife’s kind advice that Nabokov directs his own “callers” – his readers – to turn to the zero. This is a directive that has been ignored, undervalued, and disputed by many critics of

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<sup>42</sup> “Signs and Symbols” also harbors a human theme that is purposely hidden in the text – or signified through its quiet invisibility – due to the nature of the theme itself: that trauma, especially the trauma of the innocent, cannot be iterated. Trauma is something that often eludes straightforward figuration and literal language in art and literature, and Nabokov’s works, including “Signs and Symbols,” are no exception. Here, we find that trauma cannot be transcribed in a positive manner within the text; rather, it is paradoxically represented in the text’s silences and voids. “Signs and Symbols,” Nabokov said, is a story with both an inside and an outside, in which “a second (main) story is woven into or placed behind, the superficial semitransparent one” (*Selected Letters* 117). The second hidden story is only pieced together with seemingly non-sequitur details, which add up to indicate a Holocaust background to the main events in the story. For instance, in “Decoding Nabokov’s ‘Signs and Symbols,’” John Hagopian argues that the malignant forces that plague the boy are not just his horrifying and insane imaginings, but are very much a real part of his world: “The family’s history [aunts exterminated in concentration camps, suicidal cousins, bullies at school], fully justifies the feeling that they live in a malevolent universe” (118). Likewise, Leona Toker, in “‘Signs and Symbols’ In and Out of Contexts,” says, “The specific mental malady of this young man is a morbidly condensed expression of the Jewish experience in Europe at the time of the Holocaust” (175). “Signs and Symbols,” then, contains a hidden background of trauma that is too unspeakable to be represented in language. And so, instead of the trauma, the ciphers are found in its place.

“Signs and Symbols.”<sup>43</sup> The common interpretive strategy has been to decode a fixed and finite meaning in the narrative, the result of which finds the son dead at the story’s conclusion.<sup>44</sup> Critics have searched for secret messages in the patterns of numbers and images permeating the narrative,<sup>45</sup> have hypothesized a hidden significance behind the labels of the jelly jars,<sup>46</sup> and have checked the first letters of every word or line to see what meaningful words they may form.<sup>47</sup> (And who, as William Carroll first asked, has “referential mania”?<sup>48</sup> I will revisit this question.) Most recently, for example, Alexander Dolinin has interpreted the wife’s directive to the caller as a summons to examine the placement of the letter “O” on the phone:

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<sup>43</sup> For instance, Larry R. Andrews reads zero as both a “death omen,” and as a “‘veiled reference’ to the ‘cipher’ of the referential mania” (148). But for Andrews, it is no more than one of many parts of the son’s mania, and no more significant than any of the other facets of his psychosis: “The zero is thus a part of the son’s mania, and all the numbers seem to be a part of the code used by the hostile forces” (ibid). William Carroll also takes note of the zero, but does not know what to make of it: “Nabokov has placed us in the position of the boy here – is the O a letter or a number? Does it matter? Is this confusion a cipher – a clue to a hidden meaning? Or is it just null, a zero, without substance? It could be either” (213).

<sup>44</sup> Carroll writes, “The story is studded with apparent signs and symbols that the gullible reader – that is, any reader – will attempt to link together in a ‘meaningful’ pattern. Most of these signs point to the probably successful suicide of the boy” (212).

<sup>45</sup> Andrews rigorously analyzes the story’s tree and bird imagery, numerological symbolism, and doubling patterns, thereby showing how the fictive world of “Signs and Symbols” very much embodies the boy’s maniacal perspective. However, he ultimately concludes that the patterns of signs and symbols are meaningless, as the story and the boy are fictions: “As soon as we appreciate that the story is a fiction and that all its clues are therefore false, the “reality” of the boy and his mania is shattered, and it is no longer possible to speak of our participation in his ‘world’” (150). I find Andrews’ ultimate conclusion to be unsatisfactory, as it delineates clear-cut borders between fiction and reality Nabokov’s work. This idea will be elaborated upon later in my analysis.

<sup>46</sup> See Gennady Barabtarlo’s *Aerial View*, pp. 90-93; also Carol M. Dole’s “Innocent Trifles.”

<sup>47</sup> See Carol M. Dole’s “Innocent Trifles, or ‘Signs and Symbols.’”

<sup>48</sup> Carroll writes, “‘Referential mania’ is a critical disease all readers of fiction suffer from. [...] Over-reading is another, milder form of referential mania, and Nabokov has insured, through his rhetorical strategy, that the reader will succumb to the same mania that afflicts the boy” (211-212). This idea is further enlarged upon in an essay by Paul J. Rosenzweig, “The Importance of Reader Response in Nabokov’s ‘Signs and Symbols’” (1980): “At some time during the reader’s floundering attempt to find meaning, he may notice as he rereads the description of the son’s condition, that he is reading a description of his very own state” (258).

While the woman converts a digit into the letter *O*, the reader can (and must) go backwards and find out what “cipher” the girl “is turning.” With a little help of a telephone, this riddle is easily solved: instead of the “empty” zero the girl dials six that in the telephone disk code corresponds to three letters – *M*, *N*, and *O*.

I don’t think that the shadow of OMEN in this combination is just a coincidence because if we look at the numerical value of letter O as a cipher, the girl’s mistake becomes literally ominous (in the meaning of “having the significance of an omen”) (11-12).

Dolinin’s interpretation falls perfectly in line with the type of cryptograms that Nabokov is known for lacing throughout his writings, and the telephone calls are indeed ominous in the way that Dolinin specifies. However, they are ominous even without the cryptic message of the telephone disk code, and more importantly, such an interpretation still ignores the clear directions that the wife is calmly telling the caller, and that Nabokov, correspondingly, is telling his readings. The critical literature has repeatedly denied the wife’s directive to turn to zero; whereas the caller has been misdialing, we have been misreading if we have not turned to zero – the most universal signifier of nothing! – for answers. By pointing to zero, the wife points us to the nothing that zero signifies.

“Signs and Symbols” demonstrates how it is, in fact, nothing itself that allows for the patterning of referential mania to take place. It is the gap in the system, and the lack of an absolute significance, that allows for the proliferation of patterns that make meaning. As we saw in “Chapter One,” this is an idea that touches a deep chord in various theories that examine the systems that construct our knowable worlds. For instance, the zero’s place in the schema of modern mathematics, or the absent transcendental signified that unleashes the play of signifiers

(Derridian deconstruction; carnivalesque language) – these gaps are all needed for the creation of structures that grant meaning and existence. A kind of nothing is repeatedly found to be essential to the creation of the system and the world it constructs. Referential mania is another version of this idea: words and worlds are produced by a patterning that is generated by nothing.

Variations of referential mania abound throughout Nabokov's work, and their main attributes are usually the same: patterning that produces meaning or madness, and that is catalyzed by nothing. An early rendition of it is found in *The Defense*, wherein the protagonist Luzhin, as many critics have noted, has a mania similar to the boy's in "Signs and Symbols." Luzhin perceives signs and symbols in the world around him that indicate he is ensnared in a life-sized chess game, which consumes him entirely: "The only thing that really interested him was the complex, cunning game in which he somehow had become enmeshed. Helplessly and sullenly he sought for signs of the chess repetition, still wondering toward what it was tending" (227). It is tending toward nothing, of course, because there is no chess game behind the patterning. Luzhin's perception of patterns is at once his gift and his madness. On the one hand, it allows him to expertly control the chessboard and ingeniously solve the puzzles of chess, thereby creating a beautiful and ordered realm that contrasts his spontaneous and chaotic existence. On the other hand, his perception controls him, renders him a slave, and reduces all to the imagined movements and fantastical intrigues that happen along sixty-four nonexistent squares. Like the boy in "Signs and Symbols," Luzhin's mania both makes and annihilates meaning, and is derived from something that is not there.

In *Pale Fire*, referential mania takes the form of the ingenious madness of Charles Kinbote. When Kinbote acquires John Shade's final work, he expects that it will depict his imagined life as King of Zembla. Shade's poem, however, says nothing of Kinbote or of Zembla;

it is instead an autobiographical meditation on life and, in particular, on the “abyss” of death. Nevertheless, Kinbote creates a long and detailed analysis of Shade’s work in which he demonstrates, by means of loose word patterns and tenuous textual evidence, that the poem is indeed about Zembla, and about his own exile from that land. In Shade’s poem, Kinbote discovers patterns that give shape to a world that is not actually existent in lines of Shade’s work; in other words, Kinbote’s mania reads patterns in nothing, and creates a world out of that nothing in the text.

In *Ada*, referential mania appears in the madness of Aqua and other Terra-believers, who are “afloat in infinite non-thingness” (27). These characters feel as though Anti-Terra is unreal, a realm of nothing, and they therefore envision a truer, Terra realm. Their madness gives shape to Terra, and is described as a patterning mania in which “Man-made objects [lose] their significance or [grow] monstrous connotations” (24). As in referential mania, meaning is reduced to naught, and meaning burgeons to infinity. Everything is both meaningless and meaningful at the same time. Moreover, these believers in a terrestrial otherworld – which is likely *our* own world, the world of Nabokov’s readers – are attuned to the extra-textual realm, as if they occupy a literal space between fiction and reality, between word and world. In *Ada*, then, Nabokov renders our own reality the ravings of the insane; “reality” is once again in quotation marks, the product of the imaginary impulse. There is still another way in which referential mania appears in *Ada*: in Ada’s own metaphysical system of towers and bridges, which functions by perception of patterns and coincidences in one’s life, patterns which create meaning and “supreme rapture” (74), but are otherwise not there. Like the Terra-believers, Ada produces meaning through patterning of phenomena that do not exist outside the realm of her perception and imagination. Her towers are creations of her imagination, just as Terra is the collective dream of madmen.

Both Ada's towers and Terra provide a meaning and an ethos that are sorely lacking in Anti-Terra existence; they provide something "real" to make up for Anti-Terra's reality that is "non-thingness."

Referential mania later becomes "transparent things" in the novel of the same name. Hugh Person, another Nabokovian protagonist who is "harrowed by coincident symbols" (13), can perceive the histories and stories of objects around him, these "transparent things, through which the past shines" (1). By the end of the novel, Person's capacity to see the past – to view those transparent things – has reached its full potential: the past comes to life in the form of his deceased wife's footsteps, and Person dies in a fiery blaze having resurrected the past in which his wife lives, and thereby erasing a present in which he strangled his wife in her sleep. Person's perception of the past through transparent things becomes synonymous with a resurrection the past; his vision that peers through transparent things to find "coincident symbols" recreates a world that takes the place of his current existence.

In Nabokov's last novel *Look at Harlequins!* (1974), referential mania becomes the play of "looking at harlequins":

"What harlequins? Where?

"Oh everywhere. All around you. Trees are harlequins, words are harlequins. So are situations and sums. Put two things together – jokes, images – and you get a triple harlequin. Come on! Play! Invent the world! Invent reality!" (8-9)

There is also a darker version of referential mania in this novel: Vadim's chronic illness, dubbed the "numerical nimbus syndrome" (Vadim himself asserts "that 'nimbus' means nothing" [15]), causes him to read a dreadful meaning into the most minutia of things – dots in the light, heartbeats, blinking eyelashes. As his first wife deduces, his madness is brought about by a

“good clean zero” (42), and she forbids him from engaging in exercises that exhibit the relativity of existence, that demonstrate how nothing actually means anything at all in the absence of human consciousness. Thus, in his last novel, Nabokov has split up referential mania into its positive and negative poles: “looking at harlequins,” the patterning of which generates meaning and “reality”; and “numerical nimbus,” which incites an erasure of signification and a paralysis of being.

There is also a metafictional aspect of referential mania that is not only at play in “Signs and Symbols,” but also throughout Nabokov’s literary corpus: the reader of the text participates in his own kind of referential mania. “Signs and Symbols” provides an excellent illustration of this. Because the end of “Signs and Symbols” is stamped with a yawning hole (the telephone continues to ring as the narrative closes, thereby leaving the reader with no clear indication who is calling), and moreover because it is patterned with multiple numbers, signs, and symbols that bait the eager reader’s deciphering, the careful readers of this story fool themselves into becoming “referential maniacs.” What’s more, if we interpret all of the codes to indicate something about the boy, then we legitimate his dementia. He is indeed trapped in a world in which “everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme,” and his belief of this could be regarded as an awareness of Nabokov’s pen, and of the various readers and critics who pore over his story and continually reinterpret it. His referential mania, then, is otherwise understood as his tuning into the scratchings of Nabokov’s thick pencil along the page (scratchings that literally shape his existence), and his reception of the wavelengths of the readers’ thoughts (thoughts that give his life meaning). A wormhole is thus opened up between reader and text: our reading of “Signs and Symbols” does indeed exacerbate the boy’s attunement to the conspiracy that is constantly hounding him, thereby insinuating a symbiotic relationship between reader and

character. If our reading of “Signs and Symbols” is provoking the boy’s referential mania, and if the text is likewise turning us into referential maniacs, always through the double-edged cipher, then who can say what is fiction and what is reality? We have arrived, once again, at Nabokov’s “reality” in quotation marks. The cipher breaks down the borderline between reader and text, and shows the very real effects the word has on the world, and vice versa. Referential mania, in all its various forms found throughout Nabokov’s narratives, is the moment in which nothingness becomes a creative force, and the sign of the creative mind – be it the mind of a genius, or the mind of a madman.

## VI. Conclusion

In his “Foreword” to John Shade’s *Pale Fire*, the deranged editor Charles Kinbote writes: Let me state that without my notes Shade’s text simply has no human reality at all since the human reality of such a poem as his (being too skittish and reticent for an autobiographical work), with the omission of many pithy lines carelessly rejected by him, has to depend entirely on the reality of its author and his surroundings, attachments and so forth, a reality that only my notes can provide. To this statement my dear poet would probably not have subscribed, but, for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word. (29)

Kinbote’s comment touches upon a möbius-like mechanism that dominates Nabokov’s writing, and that has nothing at its always deferring center. This is that “human reality,” as Kinbote puts it, does not take shape until the commentary – or, the imaginative patterning – is made. However, it is because this “human reality” does not exist that necessitates and allows for the commentary to take place; after all, Kinbote wouldn’t need to compose his notes if his Zembla were actually present within Shade’s text. The creation of Zembla is spurred by nothing itself in *Pale Fire*, a

nothing that is at the root of Kinbote's patterns, and that enables him to write Zembla – and, by proxy, “human reality” – into being. Thus, this möbius-like mechanism works as follows: reality is nothingness and therefore puts no limits on what is and what is not. Because of this, imaginative patterning can create an infinite number of “realities.” However, if we strip these “realities” of their quotation marks – that is, of their imaginative patterning that generates them – we wind up once again at reality, or at nothing. And so on, ad infinitum.

In Nabokov's writings, reality is nothing, the creative force that ignites the imagination of *Homo poeticus*, whose artistic patterns generate the meaningful world. With this in mind, I would like to amend Johnson's theory of a “two world” model in Nabokov's works, and Alexandrov's claim that the otherworld is the central theme in the narratives of Nabokov: it is not that there is our world, and another transcendent world, existing side-by-side; there is nothing (reality), and then the world we produce from nothing (“reality”). The otherworld, in other words, is in fact nothing – all these real blanks upon which poets and madmen spin “reality” through their fictions. Or, put another way, the otherworld's principle quality is that of nothingness, and the infinite potential nothingness affords.

This is an important distinction because it directly inserts the human element into the equation, and grants man agency both in his world, and over his world. It is well known that man's agency – his free will – were of paramount importance to Nabokov. This freedom is granted by nothing in Nabokov's narratives; his characters that economize on the freedom granted by the abyss are creators of worlds and meaning. Their referential mania makes the entire world and all meaning expression of their human condition. Nabokov's writings ultimately suggest that without man's ability to be a referential maniac, without a capacity to make something out of nothing, *Homo poeticus*, and therefore, *Homo sapiens*, could not be.

## Chapter Four Samuel Beckett: Writing Immanent Nothingness

### I. Nothing happens, more than twice

Samuel Beckett's characters have much to say and do about nothing. For example, *Murphy* (1938) begins with an inverted figure of speech that delivers nothing itself to the forefront: "The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new" (1). The idiom *nothing new under the sun* is turned inside-out, so that the rhetorical "nothing new" is plucked from the plane of cliché and refreshed *anew*; nothing, in effect, becomes a something to contemplate – so signifies the opening sentence of *Murphy*. This nothing reverberates throughout the novel, most notably during Murphy's moment of peace: "the positive peace that comes when the somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up, to the Nothing, than which in the guffaw of the Abderite naught is more real" (246). Naught, the narrator tells us, is more real than nothing, a sentiment many of Beckett's later characters reiterate. For instance, Malone (*Malone Dies* 1951): "*Nothing is more real than nothing*" (192), equating nothingness with what is most real, a realm of calm indifference where, as Molloy puts it, "I forgot not only who I was, but that I was, forgot to be" (*Molloy* 1951, 49) – the zone where consciousness disappears. Critics are fond of pointing out that in *Waiting for Godot* (1954), nothing happens, twice. Many of Beckett's characters are in an ontological condition of staring at nothing: the Unnamable (*The Unnamable* 1953), for example, "whose very eyes can no longer close as they once could, [...] but must remain forever fixed and staring on the narrow space before them where there is nothing to be seen, 99% of the time" (301); or *All That Fall*'s (1957) Mr. Slocum, "Gazing straight before me, Mrs. Rooney, through the windscreen, into the void" (18). *Texts for Nothing* (1954) are not, as one might assume from the title, stories about nothing; rather, they are language emptied of stories – language of nothingness, vacated of plot, character, setting, theme, time, and meaning, voided of all except

its own discourse, which embodies nothing. There is only the utterance: “Utter, there’s nothing else, utter, void yourself of them, here as always, nothing else” (82); “it’s forever the same murmur, flowing unbroken like a single endless word and therefore meaningless, for it’s the end gives the meaning to words” (111). There are many more such utterances and visions of nothing throughout Beckett’s oeuvre, but to catalog them all here would render one exhausted, not unlike the Unnamable, whose ceaseless speech – fueled from nowhere and spurred on by the refrain *I know nothing* – is pierced through with exhaustion.

In my view, what is at stake in all these expressions of nothingness is Beckett’s attempt to pare down being to its barest of states, so as to arrive at an understanding of what being indeed is. Through an “aesthetics of lessness,” Beckett’s narratives peel away layers of identity from their characters, and eliminate elements of style from their own form; the goal of this diminishment is to arrive upon both being and narrative laid bare – ultimately, to write immanence. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, Beckettian immanence is characterized by a kind of infinite nothingness (or creative void), as well as by language. Language is an essential part of immanence, which is a kind of plentiful nothing.

I begin by elaborating upon Beckett’s “aesthetics of lessness,” which is a well-known staple of his writing. I then turn to my analysis of Beckettian immanence, drawing from Beckett’s own letters and texts to support my claims; this analysis takes much from Gilles Deleuze’s theories of immanence, but distinguishes Beckettian immanence from the former through its relationship to nothingness and to language. After highlighting the nothingness of Beckettian immanence, I survey a range of critical approaches to Beckett that examine nothingness in his work. Finally, I deliver a close reading of *Molloy* (with nods to many of

Beckett's other texts), thereby demonstrating Beckett's "aesthetics of lessness" and immanent nothingness at work within a specific piece.

## II. Aesthetics of Lessness

In his 1948 essay "Painters of Impediment" ("Peintres de l'Empêchement"), Beckett puts forward an idea that becomes, in the course of his literary opus, seminal to his artistry: "Fortunately it is not a matter of saying that which has never been said, but of saying again, as often as possible in the most reduced space, what has already been said" (133).<sup>49</sup> The task of the artist is not to produce something original, but to re-produce, to repeat what has already been expressed in an increasingly reduced manner, so that later works are more diminished than their predecessors. Should we take Beckett's statement to its ultimate implication, the goal of the artist is to eventually depict a nothingness that paradoxically expresses everything that has been expressed before – a nothingness that encompasses infinite expression.

This method, dubbed by one critic as an "aesthetic of lessness" (Levy 36), is a defining principle of Beckett's writings, the trajectory of which aims ever closer to zero, ever more courting nothingness as a depiction of the infinite whole. As another critic puts it, we need to "engender an understanding of Beckett's work in terms of a progression or evolution toward 'lessness,' or the marginalized" (Kundert-Gibbs 17). Beckett's character Molloy reiterates these critics: "The fact is, it seems, that the most you can hope is to be a little less, in the end, the creature you were in the beginning, and the middle" (32); this desire for less is characteristic of both Beckett's writing, and of the worlds he writes. That is, "aesthetics of lessness" is not just an artistic methodology by which Beckett composes his narratives; rather, the act of writing itself

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<sup>49</sup> "Heureusement il ne s'agit pas de dire ce qui n'a pas encore été dit, mais de redire, le plus souvent possible dans l'espace le plus réduit, ce qui a été dit déjà."

*lessens*. As we will see, writing *produces* a nothingness that is akin to immanence in Beckett's texts.

In *Malone Dies* (1951), we find a fitting emblem for this notion of writing that lessens, drawing ever closer to nothingness. In this second of Beckett's triad of novels, Malone composes his final manuscript with a pencil that, he repeatedly reminds us, is constantly growing smaller and smaller as he writes: "So little by little my little pencil dwindles, inevitably, and the day is fast approaching when nothing will remain but a fragment too tiny to hold" (223). Indeed, toward the end of the novel, Malone describes himself attempting to write with a slender piece of graphite, the wood of his pencil having completely whittled away. Additionally, Malone frequently loses the pencil for days at a time. Two of the main attributes of his pencil, then, are its constant diminishment and its frequent disappearance. Through this image of a pencil physically decreasing, the notion of writing is thus literally related to the idea of lessening toward nothingness; metaphorically, as I will demonstrate throughout the course of this chapter, lessening and nothingness are symbiotically connected to writing one's narrative.

While the trajectory of Beckett's literary oeuvre as a whole follows a line of increasing diminution that leads to nothingness, so that his later works achieve greater stylistic sparseness and narrative exiguity than that of his earlier works,<sup>50</sup> it is an immanent nothingness that enables, *nonetheless*, the characteristics and quality of Beckett's writings as a whole. That is, there is an intimate relationship between immanence as nothingness and noted staples of Beckett's writing, including the constant slippage of identity and language, unknowingness, the ineffable, self-

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<sup>50</sup> For more on the increasing diminishment of Beckett's writings, see Amiran (1993, 11-15), who analyzes the "Zenovian regression" of Beckett's art, which he describes as, "infinite reduction [and] comparative downsizing [that] guarantee continual being to the reduced self." Such regression is paradoxically figured as progress in Beckett's works. See also Gontarski (1985, 1-21), who discusses the "intent of undoing" in Beckett's works that enact "a movement toward simplicity, toward the essential, toward the universal" (3), and whose "evolution is finally almost a devolution, the doing an undoing, the movement toward higher and higher levels of abstraction" (4).

erasing statements, and liminalities. Besides informing many qualities of his writing, the concept of nothingness underpins much of the philosophical and ontological concerns that Beckett's narratives explore and express. Here, I aim to examine closely how this immanent nothingness is expressed in Beckett's writings, and moreover how it informs these stylistic and narrative characteristics of his artistry. The goal is to demonstrate how immanent nothingness is intimately bound up with writing in Beckett's narratives, and moreover how both nothingness and writing re-present, and thereby create, the world beyond the page. Nothingness is both the means and the ends of Beckett's works.

### III. Immanent Nothingness

In my estimation, Beckettian immanence most closely aligns with that described by Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze re-envisioned immanence in such a way that it is no longer conceived in opposition to transcendence, as it has widely been understood in philosophy and religion. Traditionally, immanence (from the Latin *in manere* – “to remain within”) refers to a divine force that pervades and affects all being; it figures in contrast to theories of transcendence, which envision the divine force as beyond the empirical realm – the transcendent influences and generates from the outside of the material world, not from within. Deleuze, however, conceives of immanence as an infinite, undifferentiated plane of being that rules out any transcendence of being; that is, there is nothing outside or beyond the immanent plane. His conceptions of immanence employ a kind of philosophical vertigo: he describes immanence as always flowing forth (“With a striking etymological figure that displaces the origin of the term ‘immanence’ from *manere* [‘to remain’] to *manare* [‘to flow out’], Deleuze returns mobility and life to immanence” [Agamben 226]), and yet always remaining within itself; immanence is univocity of being that encompasses an always-differentiating process. In “Immanence: A Life ...” (1995),

Deleuze tells us that “Absolute immanence is in itself: it is not in something, *to* something; it does not depend on an object or belong to a subject” (178). That is, categories of subject and object no longer hold meaning in the plane of absolute immanence, as neither the subject nor consciousness (which both require an *other* or an *object* to establish their boundaries) exists in immanence. Instead, immanence is figured as a plane before/without consciousness and the subject: a strictly impersonal realm.

Deleuze plucks an example from Charles Dickens’ *Our Mutual Friend* to illustrate what he means by immanence; notice that his example presents immanence as an ontological realm prior to the personal and defined “I”:

No one has described what *a* life is better than Charles Dickens [...] A disreputable man, a rogue, held in contempt by everyone, is found as he lies dying. Suddenly, those taking care of him manifest an eagerness, respect, even love, for his slightest sign of life. Everybody bustles about to save him, to the point where, in his deepest coma, this wicked man himself senses something soft and sweet penetrating him. But to the degree that he comes back to life, his saviors turn colder, and he becomes once again mean and crude. Between his life and his death, there is a moment that is only that of *a* life playing with death. (179)

*A* life – or immanence – is in a state of suspension between life and death, figured as a liminal realm. But Deleuze is quick to add that immanence is not confined to a play with death (“we shouldn’t enclose life in the single moment when individual life confronts universal death” [ibid]), but is ubiquitous in all. He tells us, “We will say of pure immanence that it is A LIFE, and nothing else” (ibid). In describing absolute immanence as “a life,” Deleuze highlights its impersonal nature: the indefinite article signifies the indeterminate nature of immanence.

What is at stake, then, in Deleuze's conception of immanence is a reconsideration of bare life. In contrast to the general trend in Western philosophy that conceives of bare life as the Aristotelian "nutritive faculty" (the capacity to grow and decay), Deleuze seeks to distinguish bare life as a zone in which hierarchies and separations are impossible to establish and yet a "spark of life" still exists. As absolute immanence, *a* life, "does not depend on an object or belong to a subject," so the Aristotelian notion of bare life – nutritive faculty – becomes obsolete: Aristotle's conception of bare life designates nutritive faculty as the minimum means through which life is attributed to a *subject*. In contrast, Deleuze imagines immanence, a life, as that zone where the life of the subject falls away or no longer functions: "The life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life ..." (ibid).

It is this "impersonal and yet singular life" that is immanence. As Giorgio Agamben (reading Deleuze) puts it, "The plane of immanence thus functions as a principle of virtual indetermination, in which the vegetative and the animal, the inside and the outside and even the organic and the inorganic, in passing through one another, cannot be told apart" (233). Beckett's narratives, through their "aesthetics of lessness," increasingly approach such an immanent realm where distinctions between human and animal, animal and vegetable, vegetable and mineral, do not exist. His characters become more and more divested of their selves, diminish in human identity to the point where they embody plants or take on the role of dogs or even travel as the wind. They also, as they come closer to immanence, approach a nothingness that encompasses the entirety of existence. As discussed earlier, Beckett's "aesthetics of lessness" attempt to articulate, in an increasingly reduced form, all that has been said before; thus, the ultimate goal of such a literary philosophy would be to say nothing, and in so doing say everything. Likewise, a distinctive aspect of Beckettian immanence is its relationship to nothingness, and by proxy, its

union with infinity. Beckett's characters who come close to immanence encounter a type of nothingness that is, paradoxically, abundantly plentiful – filled with all varieties and intricacies of being. Recall here the description of Murphy's peace, first quoted in this chapter's introduction: "the positive peace that comes when the somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up, to the Nothing" (246). Within this description there is a concise definition of Beckettian immanence: all the somethings taken together ultimately add up to Nothing itself; conversely, we may arrive at this ultimate Nothing through lessening, when the "somethings give way." Beckettian immanence is thus figured as a nothingness that is comprised of infinite being.

The mutual relationship between nothingness and infinity has been studied in both mathematical and philosophical communities, and it will be helpful here to briefly cite some of the main theories concerning the symbiosis between zero and infinity. Mathematicians tell us that zero and infinity are two sides of the same coin: "The troublesome nature of zero lies with the strange powers of the infinite, and it is possible to understand the infinite by studying zero" (Seife 131). As many have demonstrated, to divide by zero can mathematically prove an infinite number of statements (be they true or false, according to our perception of reality), which is why mathematicians, as a rule, hold that it is a mistake to divide by zero.<sup>51</sup> What is at issue is the entire framework of mathematics: dividing by zero makes any solution possible and true, and thereby delegitimizes mathematical epistemology, demonstrates how mathematics is a system that conforms to our human understanding of the world. Dividing by zero is either a fiction, or the mathematical system is a fiction; zero is dangerous precisely because it allows for an infinite number of solutions, which our mathematical framework cannot permit in order to make sense of the world. This is perhaps why the notion of an infinite void is more at home in religious studies;

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<sup>51</sup> See Seife (2000, 217-219). Here, Seife gives a proof demonstrating that Winston Churchill is a carrot; he does so by dividing by zero.

“while many mathematicians saw the complex numbers as a convenient fiction, others saw God” (Seife 135). A codependence between zero and infinity is found in various theologies, wherein the void is figured as a bounteous space, ripe with potential for being. Indeed, the iconography of the void often signifies plentitude and creation:

“From the ‘O’ to the egg was an obvious step since the egg was the symbol of generation and creation; since, too, it bore the shape of zero, contradictions of all and nothing could be constructed on eggs”; which one can continue through the mystical O of the Kabbalah, the Hollow Crown which served as an icon of *ex nihilo* creation; the great circle of white light signifying infinity for Traherne; the origin and place of birth – “nothing” as slang for vagina in Elizabethan English; to the icon of de-creation and self-annihilation in the shape of the circle made by a snake swallowing its own tail. (Rotman 59-60)

Beckett’s narratives, too, present a void that is remarkably full, explore an immanence that is marked by infinite zero, and embrace this division by zero that so threatens the logic of human mathematics.

I have argued that Beckettian narratives approach an immanence not unlike that theorized by Deleuze – undifferentiated and impersonal being – and yet distinguished by its qualities of nothingness and infinity. I would now like to suggest that there is a third quality of Beckettian immanence, which is language. Language is also intimately a part of the barest of beings, despite Beckett’s (and his characters’) attempts to be silent, or to precede or go beyond language. In the so-called “German Letter of 1937,” Beckett writes to Axel Kaun, expressing his growing intuition that language seems a “veil that must be torn apart to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it.” He craves silence, which he believes contains the power to bore holes in language and get at the real thing: “To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it

– be it something or nothing – begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today” (172). This desire to fill language with holes is reiterated by Beckett’s character Molloy in a line that seems plucked from the same sentiment with which Beckett composed his 1937 letter to Kaun: “[...] you would do better, at least no worse, to obliterate texts than to blacken margins, to fill in the holes of words till all is blank and flat and the whole ghastly business looks like what is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery” (13). This desire to “bore holes in language” so as to “get at the things (or the nothingness) behind it” is another way of seeking out immanence; Beckett’s “aesthetics of lessness” and his complementary longing to “bore holes in language” are both aimed at the same thing (or non-thing) – to discover that “something or nothing” that is the essence of all being. This “something or nothing” that Beckett’s narratives approach, however, is fully imbued with a kind of language, even with Beckett’s tearing apart of language’s veil. That is, his characters may be capable of ridding themselves of *human* language, but there is another kind of language that always accompanies them, and that wills all being to narrate itself. The world is fully composed of the word; immanence speaks a language of its own.

David Alpaugh’s comments about the radio drama *All That Fall* (1956) suggest an apt understanding of the status of language(s) in the general scope of Beckett’s literary corpus: “Beckett contrasts the timeless language of Arcady with the dying language of Man, which has become formal and inadequate” (325). The presence of an immanent language (e.g. “the timeless language of Arcady”) that has nothing to do with human language is indicated many times throughout Beckett’s oeuvre. Many characters, for instance, describe themselves as constantly speaking, even though they have long abandoned the language of man. In Beckett’s triad of novels (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*), each of the central characters exhibits a dichotomy between the speech of man and the language they currently murmur in their decrepit

states – right at the lip of vanishing altogether, in the cusp of immanence. Molloy no longer uses the words of men, yet still gushes forth with narrative: “I had been living so far from words for so long” (31). Malone occupies himself with stories while residing in speechlessness: “It was not long before I found myself alone, in the dark. That is why I gave up trying to play and took to myself for ever shapelessness and speechlessness, incurious wondering, darkness, long stumbling with outstretched arms, hiding” (180). The Unnamable’s speech is not a product of his own being: “I know no more questions and they keep on pouring out my mouth. I think I know what it is, it’s to prevent the discourse from coming to an end, this futile discourse which is not credited to me and brings me not a syllable nearer silence” (307). In all three cases, language is found in a plane of being that is not contingent upon human epistemology or subjective consciousness. Instead, a compulsion to narrate accompanies immanence – as long as the world exists, it carries with it an obligation *to word* (used here as a verb). To word the world is a rite of immanence, and not dependent upon the human tongue; as Beckett’s characters discover (and as we will discover as well), there is another language that is fundamental to immanent being, a narrative composition that plays a role in the creation of all things, human, animal, vegetable, mineral, and otherwise.

To sum up, Beckettian immanence, like Deleuzian immanence, is bare life – impersonal and undifferentiated being that is the requisite of the world, the “spark of life” for all things, both animate and inanimate, living and mineral. Beckett’s narratives, through “aesthetics of lessness” and divestment of his characters’ beings, draw ever closer to immanence, which figures as a kind of infinite nothingness in Beckett’s texts. The closer Beckett’s characters come to immanence, the more they peer into nothingness and see themselves; immanent nothingness characterizes and enables an infinite number of beings. Like Deleuze’s univocity of being that embodies an

always-differentiating process, Beckett's immanent nothingness is an unwavering state that encompasses infinite being(s). That is, Beckettian immanence is characterized as a kind of nothingness that enables an infinite number of existences, all of which amount to the same bare life at their core. Lastly, immanence is tied up with language in Beckett's narratives, for as long as the world exists (even a world composed of nothingness), it is compelled to narrate itself. As we will see, a compulsion to narrate is intimately tied to immanent nothingness. Ultimately, I plan to demonstrate that nothingness is the condition of immanence, and therefore the condition of both the world and the word, in Beckettian narrative.

#### **IV. Critical Approaches to Nothingness in Beckett's Writings**

Nothingness is not an unfamiliar idea for those who study Beckett. In general, the most common critical approach to the concept of nothingness in Beckett's writings takes from Heidegger's metaphysics and/or Sartre's existentialism. Lance St. John Butler, for example, does both: he finds connections between Beckett's fictions and Heidegger's concepts of nothingness and the ontological authenticity of angst, as well as parallels between Beckett's narrative depictions of consciousness and Sartre's philosophy of nothingness and its relationship to being. Regarding the former, Butler recalls Heidegger's notion that Dasein feels anxious when brought face to face with the "nothing" of the world, a "nothing" Heidegger designates as the condition of the world. With this in mind, Butler argues:

The application of this to Beckett must be obvious. His fiction in particular abounds with characters terrified of "nothing," depending on "nothing," needing "nothing" in a way that makes it quite plain that this nothing is not just a "not something." And the state of mind of the Beckettian narrator is rarely specific fear of things within-the-world, but it is not comfort and freedom from everything like fear either; it is *Angst*. (47)

Butler goes on to examine this inseparable relationship between nothing and angst primarily as it appears in Beckett's *Watt* (the not-ness of Mr. Knott), and briefly in a smattering of Beckett's other works. This ubiquitous presence of nothing in Beckett's narratives is often, he argues, accompanied by anxiety: it is, he tells us, "a metaphor for Being-towards the nothingness of freedom, the anxious peering into the 'depths'" (50).

In a later chapter, Butler draws parallels between Beckettian narrative and Sartre's notions of nothingness as delineated in *Being and Nothingness* (1943). For Sartre, consciousness is nothing, a hole in the otherwise solidity of being, and that which is necessarily opposed to being. As consciousness cannot present itself to itself, the "knower" – or consciousness – is not apprehensible; in other words, it is nothing. To attempt to confront one's consciousness is to confront nothingness, which is precisely where Butler finds an important link between Sartre's philosophy and Beckett's narratives: "Beckett has frequently worked on the idea of consciousness confronting itself" (Butler 82). Indeed, when the Beckettian "I" attempts to confront itself, it again and again reacts in a way that negates its "I", or associates its "I" with nothingness. "It's not me" (92), proclaims the narrator of *Texts for Nothing* (1950-1952); "I, of whom I know nothing" (304), the Unnamable tells us; the speaking voice, Mouth, of *Not I* (1972), who does not use the first-person singular pronoun once throughout the course of her dramatic monologue (her famous refrain, "who?...no!...she!", underscores her refusal, or inability, to self-associate with "I").<sup>52</sup>

This existentialist notion that consciousness is nothingness will be built upon throughout this chapter; however, in Beckett's writings, consciousness also appears as a byproduct of language, of the compulsion to narrate that is built into immanence. In Beckett's narratives,

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<sup>52</sup> Other critics who analyze Beckett's narratives in relation to Sartre's notions of nothingness include Hesla (1971, 184-192), and Cohn (1973, 111-112).

language happens with or without the will of the speaker; as a result, his consciousness, and by proxy his being, both come into knowable existence. Intimately related to the workings of the mind is the experience and process of writing, which functions, in Beckett's worlds, as an immanent means of creation, "an existential activity, where shape and hence meaning emerge and are delineated through the writing" (Gontarsky 3). This is similar to a notion expressed by the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty: "The writer's thought does not control his language from without; the writer is himself a kind of new idiom, constructing itself. [...] My own words take me by surprise and teach me what I think" (8, 9). For Merleau-Ponty, writing is not the expression of a thought that preexists the writing; instead, writing constructs thought, produces the author and his authority, and retroactively generates the writer who knows what he thinks before he sets down to write. Thus, writing *precedes* thought, consciousness, the author, the writer, and the knowing being: to reiterate the narrator of Beckett's *Unnamable*, "I know no more questions and they keep on pouring out of my mouth" (307).

However, in Beckett's texts, this equation between writing and thinking is taken a step further: writing and speaking not only construct thought, but, as argued earlier, are part of immanence. As many critics have previously commented, in Beckett's fiction, the terrain of the world and the realm of the mind increasingly become one and the same – skull-shaped territories. The wandering of the mind represents the workings of the universe, so that "Beckett's landscapes represent and embody thought, abstraction – the contents of the mind" (Amiran 33). Existence and consciousness are thus functions of an immanent language in Beckett's world, and the precession of language is figured as a will-less spontaneity that brings into existence beings whose own desires (of course, desires constructed by their words) often run counter to their

existence – they embody a state of oxymoron, as they *indifferently wish* for the peace of non-existence, of silence, of not-speaking, of nothingness.

Another approach to understanding nothingness in Beckett's oeuvre explores the relationship between Beckettian narrative and Zen notions of emptiness (*Sunya*) and the void (*mu*), notions that are further connected to theories of chaos. In *No-Thing is Left to Tell: Zen/Chaos Theory in the Dramatic Art of Samuel Beckett* (1999), John Leeland Kundert-Gibbs draws a number of similarities between conceptions of the void as found in Beckett, Zen Buddhism, and chaos theory. Both Zen and chaos theory, according to Kundert-Gibbs, figure the void as a type of chaos that surrounds our knowable order. This chaos, however, does not function in opposition to our well-behaved systems and ordered existence; rather, (like Beckettian immanence) it ontologically *precedes* ordered being. The void – which is a type of out-of-order chaos – is “at once nothing and the progenitor of the world” (Kundert-Gibbs 19). Both Zen and chaos theory exemplify a paradigm shift away from Newtonian notions of the void and chaos as nihilistic forces that obliterate the ordered world, and toward the idea that the void and its intrinsic chaos are positive forces that create. Likewise, “the void that infuses [Beckett's] works is not the terminus to which all spirals down but the source from which patterns of beauty, if not of traditional meaning, spring” (Kundert-Gibbs 179). Kundert-Gibbs' understanding of a chaotic void that ontologically precedes ordered being, and that generates all of existence not despite but because of its chaotic emptiness, provides important groundwork for my theory of immanent nothingness in Beckettian narrative. Like the chaotic void of Zen and chaos theory, immanent nothingness is figured as bare life in which all being participates, and that generates all being. The chaotic void, like immanent nothingness, is impersonal and undifferentiated life,

uniform being that is comprised of always-differing infinite parts; they both precede and generate all existence.

Another approach to nothingness in Beckett's works positions the void as a mirror in which characters are reflected and thereby come to know themselves and develop subjectivity. In *Traped in Thought: A Study of the Beckettian Mentality* (2007), Eric P. Levy argues, "where existence concerns 'staring out at nothing' is the quintessential Beckettian experience" (37). There is, he claims, a mirror relationship between the void and self-consciousness; to gaze into the void (as many of Beckett's characters do) is to contemplate oneself – "The external void is ultimately a reflection of inner emptiness" (ibid). This is similar, of course, to Sartrean analyses of Beckett's narratives that equate consciousness with nothingness. However, Levy's analysis is distinguished from these by his emphasis on the liminal mirror between the void and consciousness, and by an act of mimesis whereby the subject (consciousness) attempts to approximate the condition of its reflection (the void). That is, the Beckettian subject does not identify the void as itself, but adopts the void as itself – the reflection (the void) precedes and informs the reflected (consciousness). Levy writes, "the recurrent motif of seeing nothing or 'staring out at nothing' not only signifies perception of the outer void and, by extension, perception of inner emptiness, but also assimilates the staring subject to the status of a reflection, 'staring back sightlessly' from the mirror it inhabits" (38). This idea of the staring Beckettian subject who derives his identity from his reflection that mirrors the void is reminiscent, in my estimation, to Baudrillard's notions of the postmodern simulacrum – characterized by the map that precedes the territory, the precession of simulacra, copies of copies ... that have replaced the original (or perhaps, the original never existed).<sup>53</sup> Similar to Baudrillard's precession of simulacra, Levy's description of the production of a subject through his assimilation to his

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<sup>53</sup> See Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994).

reflection is built upon a mechanic whereby the traditional copy (the reflection) informs and constructs the original (the subject reflected). The copy or reflection thus takes over the “preceding” space conventionally occupied by the original or the subject. Levy’s observation that the Beckettian reflection both constructs the reflected subject and depicts the void underpins my theory that nothingness is immanence in Beckett’s narratives. As immanent nothingness encompasses infinite being, so any being (no matter animal, human, mineral, vegetable, etc.) can look in the void and see itself; this reflected void, moreover, is the immanent nothingness that enables the construction of any and all being. I will revisit and develop these ideas throughout this chapter.

Finally, in one of the most recent considerations of nothingness in Beckett’s texts, *Le Voisin de zero* (2007; translated as *Zero’s Neighbor: Sam Beckett* [2010]), Hélène Cixous muses upon Beckett’s artistry as “the mute line [that] has its say” (12), or as discourse where we dream of “the breath of nothingness, no, the breath of a nothingness, murmuring what if I didn’t exist?” (14). She can love Beckett, Cixous confesses, “for he maintains the being to faint in the vicinity of zero, himself Zero’s Neighbor” (8). She then poses a question and immediately answers it in a way that negates her earlier claim (much like Beckett himself):

If Mr. Beckett is Zero’s neighbor, who is zero? But Beckett may well be Zero. Zero’s neighbor comes and pays him a visit. Zero’s neighbor tends toward Zero, he never gets there. There always remains a little something, “precious little.” A little something is no mean (no)thing, it is a little nothing, it is never nothing, one gets nearer, the Neighbor goes to Zero’s, the null set. The Neighbor in the vicinity or his Voice. (9)

Having initially positioned Beckett as zero’s neighbor, she then re-positions Beckett in the space of zero itself; in doing so, Cixous either negates her first positioning of Beckett or, on the

contrary, places Beckett in two positions at once – as both zero, and as that which resides next to zero. This boomeranging between the realm of zero itself and the infinite space bordering zero characterizes the ontological condition of many of Beckett’s characters, especially Molloy, who will be the main focus of the remainder of this chapter.

## V. *Molloy*: Re-Questing Immanent Nothingness

Molloy is included among a long genealogy of Beckettian characters who have been greatly stripped down (naked, paralyzed, impotent, toothless, amputated, forgotten and forgetting, without memory, without knowledge, desire-less, hunger-less, etc.) and yet are still compelled to write or speak. At a being stripped of its many constructs – physical, cultural, social, etc. – there is still language (not necessarily human language), which places language very close to bare, unaccommodated, immanent life. As language is generally considered, at best, to be a second-hand rendition of “reality,” traffics in universal signs that attempt to communicate individual and unique entities, and employs signifiers to express the signified, so the placement of language close to stripped-down, un-/pre-constructed, essential existence seems a kind of contradiction. Language is generally regarded as a construct; how can it be so close to immanent being, which by definition eschews construct, exists prior to and without construct? In *Molloy*, as in many of Beckett’s texts, the utterly pared-down being who nevertheless cannot still his language exemplifies a paradox: immanent being is intimately related to language.

The novel itself is comprised of two segments. The first contains the narrative of Molloy, who describes his quest for his mother; he indicates on the opening pages that the quest has been completed as he himself now occupies his mother’s bed, and is compelled to write pages for a man who comes every week. The second segment features the narrative of Moran, who is sent on a journey to find Molloy. Throughout his journey, Moran increasingly comes to resemble

Molloy, the very being that he seeks. Likewise, Molloy comes to resemble his mother, as indicated not only by his residing in her bed, but also by his own estimations: “I have taken her place. I must resemble her more and more” (7). These kindred quests through which the seeker more and more resembles and becomes that which he seeks are further distinguished by the character of their journeys’ goals – that is, both Molloy and Ma figure as progenitors of being that are themselves largely without qualities, very close to nothingness. In terms of degrees of nothingness, Ma is arguably closer to nothing than Molloy (she cannot count higher than two, whereas Molloy can still wield a great many numbers, as we will see); still, Molloy himself occupies a grey liminal zone between being and nothingness, as I will demonstrate. In short, as both Molloy and Moran come to resemble that which they seek, one can determine that what they seek is in fact their selves; and as each come to more and more resemble nothingness throughout their quests, we may further argue that their selves (which they seek) are in fact nothing.

As such, *Molloy* functions as a narrative that repeatedly undermines traditional motifs and aspects of the novel, while simultaneously re-inscribing various novelistic conventions. The narrative employs familiar novelistic themes such as the quest, self-discovery, and the detective story, however these themes are undermined by the very discoveries that these novelistic conventions reveal: discovery of the self is discovery of nothingness. Moreover, the narrative (that is: the text, language, writing) is intimately related to the condition of the self and to the process of the quest, so that to write generates both the quest and the self – yet there is nothing to quest for, just as there is no self to discover. The novel thus figures as a progenitor of the desire to find the self; without narrative, the notion of self would cease to exist.

Beckett's *Molloy*, then, reads as an allegory of a modern quest to come of age. However, in Beckett's rendition, to come of age involves a divestment of being rather than a securing of identity, a devolution rather than an evolution. As if speaking directly to his predicament of being cast in a coming-of-age narrative, the character Moran confesses:

I seemed to see myself aging as swiftly as a day-fly. But the idea of aging was not exactly the one which offered itself to me. And what I saw was more like a crumbling, a frenzied collapsing of all that had always protected me from all I was always condemned to be. Or it was like a kind of clawing towards light and countenance I could not name, that I had once known and long denied. (149)

Beckett *offers* Moran a different kind of aging: not one in which he “comes of age,” establishes an identity, and takes hold of an “I”, but an aging that erodes his “I” and any wisdom, experience, or sense of self conveyed within that pronoun. The allegorical quest to find “oneself” transforms, in Beckett's novel, into a quest to divest one of self – in hopes of arriving at that which one “was always condemned to be,” or that which one “had once known and long denied.” These – that which one is condemned to be, and the clawing toward unnamable light that was once known and long since forgotten – represent death and birth, respectively; they figure as the two bookends of the identified self's “I”. They also figure as bare life and immanent being, which in Beckett's narrative, are also intimately related to nothingness and language.

Molloy's narrative often unveils increasing self-knowledge as the mechanic whereby the quest for one's self reveals – or *constructs* (the difference between the two is not clear-cut in Beckett's texts) – a self that does not exist; in other words, to be conscious of oneself is to be aware of one's nothingness. This mechanic is often revealed in the various episodes in which Molloy pointedly describes an attempt to catalog knowledge about himself. Even the most

mundane and qualitatively objective aspects of Molloy's being are obliterated into nothingness under the mechanic of self-knowledge. For instance, Molloy adds up the number of times he farts in a day; upon further inspection, however, he concludes that he rarely passes gas, if at all.

I can't help it, gas escapes from my fundament on the least pretext, it's hard not to mention it now and then, however great my distaste. One day I counted them. Three hundred and fifteen farts in nineteen hours, or an average of over sixteen farts an hour. After all, it's not excessive. Four farts every fifteen minutes. It's nothing. Not even one fart every four minutes. It's unbelievable. Damn it, I hardly fart at all, I should never have mentioned it. Extraordinary how mathematics help you to know yourself. (30)

Molloy's figure – three hundred and fifteen farts in nineteen hours – is demolished by his exercise whereby he seeks to determine just how often he can actually be described as a “being who farts.” For the further he averages the number of times he passes gas in a day – from sixteen farts an hour, to four farts every fifteen minutes, to not even a single fart every four minutes – the closer he arrives at zero: that is, he can rarely, if ever, be considered a “farter,” and indeed is never a “farter” if he repeatedly subdivides the unit of the time by which he takes the average of the number of farts.

Here, Molloy's mathematical calculations of his flatulence exemplify a version of one of Zeno's most famous paradoxes. The Greek philosopher Zeno of Elea (ca. 490-430 BCE) is mostly remembered for his paradoxes that illustrate how motion is impossible. In his most famous puzzle that features Achilles and the tortoise, Zeno demonstrates how the swift-footed Achilles can never catch up with the lumbering tortoise who has been given a head start. Through arguing that Achilles must first reach the place where the tortoise had begun the race (and has since moved away from a certain distance;  $d_1$ ), and then must run that new distance ( $d_1$ )

during which the tortoise has moved forward a bit more ( $d_2$ ), and so on ad infinitum, so Zeno demonstrates through mathematical proof that Achilles can never catch up with the tortoise. By taking a continuous motion and dividing it into an infinite number of steps, motion is reduced to zero, becomes, even, impossible. Likewise, by taking a series of farts and dividing them by an increasingly small unit of time, Molloy proves that he never farts. His farts, as motion, have been reduced to nothing: “Extraordinary how mathematics help you to know yourself.” Molloy’s calculations of his flatulence also reenact, on a microcosmic level, the so-called “aesthetics of lessness” that are said by critics to define the trajectory of Beckett’s literary corpus, and that Beckett himself hints at as a defining principle of his artistry in the aforementioned “German Letter of 1937.”

Through these “aesthetics of lessness,” both Moran and Molloy arguably set off on a journey to “find themselves.” The journey to find oneself is, of course, a literary archetype; in the case of *Molloy*, the most relevant predecessor is likely Homer’s *Odyssey*. In many ways, Molloy’s meandering journey to his mother corresponds to Odysseus’ journey home, and much critical work has been done to collect and analyze these Homeric elements within Beckett’s novel.<sup>54</sup> Molloy, at times, places himself in the position of Odysseus: evoking the ambiguous freedom of Arnoldus Geulincx’s philosophies, Molloy pictures himself “free [...] on the black boat of Ulysses, to crawl towards the East, along the deck. [...] And from the poop, poring upon the wave, a sadly rejoicing slave, I follow with my eyes the proud and futile wake” (51). Note the pun: “rejoicing” becomes “re-Joyce-ing” – the significance of which will be discussed shortly. Molloy also speaks of an Aegean who was once present in his being: “The Aegean, thirsting for heat and light, him I killed, he killed himself, early on, in me” (30). Besides these direct nods to Homer within *Molloy*, scholars point to parallels between the quests of

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<sup>54</sup> See Phillips (1984); Cohn (1973, 83); Fletcher (1975, 161).

Telemachus and Odysseus and the journeys of Moran and Molloy; decipher a Circe in Lousse and a Polyphemus in the policeman; and compare Odysseus' shifting identities with the fluid identity of Molloy (who later bleeds into Moran, Malone, and the Unnamable, among others).

It is this last parallel that delivers the most relevant groundwork to the present study. Homer's *Odyssey* presents a hero who, many times throughout the epic, must deny or hide his identity as Odysseus. As demonstrated in the episode with Polyphemus, Odysseus must adopt a non-identity if he is to survive. When Odysseus tells Polyphemus that his name is οὐτις (which is a diminutive of his own given name, but also sounds a lot like the Greek word for "nobody" or "no-man"), this trick ultimately allows Odysseus to escape the Cyclops' island: when Polyphemus cries to the other Cyclopes to help capture this "nobody," they turn away, believing that he speaks nonsense. The name "Odysseus" contains within it a diminutive "nobody," the odium of existence, in addition to the great epic hero; this epic predecessor of modern man contains within him the potential to be "nobody." This, in my view, is the most significant correspondence between Molloy and Odysseus – their capacity for nothingness, to be no-man. The word οὐτις that may be read as a diminutive form of the name "Odysseus" and also as the word "nobody" exemplifies the condition of Molloy, as well as the nature of nothingness within Beckett's narratives: Molloy's journey, which diminishes his being, reveals this nothingness as his most intimate and immanent self; likewise, Beckettian narrative, which diminishes through its "aesthetics of lessness," displays this nothingness, this οὐτις, as the immanent condition of both the world and the word.

It is also in this way that *Molloy* may represent Beckett's response to Joyce's *Ulysses*: as a stripped down, impoverished, impotent, barren rendition of the *Odyssey*, to counter Joyce's *Ulysses* and its masterful control of knowledge and language. This desire to write "impotence"

so as to distinguish himself from Joyce's "omniscience" is explained by Beckett himself. In a conversation with his biographer James Knowlson, Beckett describes a revelation he had during 1945 while in his mother's room in Dublin: "I realized that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, in control of one's material. He was always *adding* to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realized that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding" (Knowlson 47). This position is corroborated by another statement Beckett makes in 1956, this time to *New York Times* reporter Israel Shenker:

... the difference is that Joyce was a superb manipulator of material, perhaps the greatest. He was making words do the absolute maximum of work. There isn't a syllable that's superfluous. The kind of work I do is one in which I am not master of my material. The more Joyce knew the more he could. His tendency is toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think that impotence has been exploited in the past. There seems to be a kind of aesthetic axiom that expression is an achievement – must be an achievement. My little exploration is that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unusable – as something by definition incompatible with art.

This "whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unusable – as something by definition incompatible with art" is, it seems to me, the object of Molloy's quest: that is, a state of nothingness. The goal is to discover the diminutive "nobody" (οὐτίς) fundamental to his being, and in so doing, find freedom, escape from the odiousness (οδύσσομαι) and suffering that is inherent in existence. By evoking Odysseus' journey home in Molloy's wanderings to Ma, Beckett positions *Molloy* against Joyce's *Ulysses*, and illustrates the

kernels of impotence, meaninglessness, and nothingness that coincide with the mastery, meaning, and wholeness in Homer's epic. As we well know, these kernels of impotence, meaninglessness, and nothingness later come to define the modern condition.

Molloy, as mentioned earlier, is an ambiguous being whose fluid character (if he may be said to have a character) is best defined as liminal. He confesses to us, "even my sense of identity was wrapped in a namelessness often hard to penetrate" (31). Indeed, in Molloy's ever-grey country (which is as much the geography of his mind as it is a physical landscape; significantly, Molly describes himself as the same grayish color as his countryside [10]), there are no clearly defined distinctions between traditionally opposing categories. It is therefore difficult to apply concrete names to the condition of Molloy, and to the realm he occupies. Even life and death bleed into one another: Molloy wonders, for instance, if his mother was ever dead "enough to bury" (7), as if there are gradations of death. Later, Molloy tells us that he has "ceased to lived," and that, "It is in the tranquility of decomposition that I remember the long confused emotion which was my life [...] To decompose is to live too" (25). Molloy himself cannot determine the status of his own being, exclaiming that he has "ceased to live," only to immediately assert that he decomposes, which is itself a type of living in his estimation. Ultimately, death is a concept that eludes Molloy: "For death is a condition I have never been able to conceive to my satisfaction and which therefore cannot go down in the ledger of weal and woe" (68). He feels he no longer lives, or has "ceased to live," but he is not quite dead yet, at least not dead "enough to bury." His conceptions of life and death, then, are not drawn along absolute lines; rather, life and death shade into one another in Molloy's skull-shaped country.

Additionally, similar to the border between zero and zero's neighbor, the boundary between self and other are blurred in Molloy's country as well: "People pass too, hard to

distinguish from yourself” (8). Sleep and waking existence also overlap: “For my waking was a kind of sleeping” (53). Molloy’s descriptions of his existence are repeatedly marked as having a threshold quality – in the process of receding to nothingness, but not quite having arrived at nothingness yet: “All grows dim. A little more and you’ll go blind. It’s in the head. It doesn’t work any more, it says, I don’t work any more. You go dumb as well and sounds fade. The threshold scarcely crossed, that’s how it is” (8). “The threshold scarcely crossed,” implying a position right at the liminal point of the threshold; existence suspended in-between, occupying ambiguous, no-named mid-zones. Molloy appears to be at the very end of a tether, teetering between being and nothingness, between life and death, and the direction of his passage through this threshold is in the way of ever lessening, of withering, ending, nothing – this threshold is of “a world collapsing endlessly” (40). At the lip of nothingness – stripped of toes and teeth, paralyzed of limb, forgetful of name and objective, blurred of senses, and far from speaking in language his fellow man can comprehend (but still speaking!) – Molloy occupies the threshold between being and nothingness, and he is diminishing toward the latter.

As if peering from a brink into the abyss, Molloy intuits and even, at times, experiences moments of this nothingness, which is often characterized as a kind of immanence. It is this plane of immanence, this “impersonal and yet singular life” that Molloy (like Dickens’ scoundrel, as described by Deleuze) seems to occasionally embody, and to be journeying towards. There are numerous moments in Molloy’s narrative in which he describes a kind of fading away of subject into an immanent state – when his individual, subjective life peters out, and he revels in pure, undifferentiated being. For instance, Molloy in Lousse’s garden:

And there was another noise, that of my life become the life of this garden as it rode the earth of deeps and wilderness. Yes, there were times when I forgot not only who I was,

but that I was, forgot to be. Then I was no longer that sealed jar to which I owed my being so well preserved, but a wall gave way and I filled with roots and tame stems for example, stakes long since dead and ready for burning, the recess of night and the imminence of dawn, and then the labor of the planet rolling eager into winter, winter would rid it of these contemptible scabs. Or of that winter I was the precarious calm, the thaw of the snows which make no difference and all the horrors of it all all over again. But that did not happen to me often, mostly I stayed in my jar which knew neither seasons nor gardens. (49)

Molloy's dissipating being is first rendered as a noise, as if he himself has become sound wave, riding like ocean swells and surf over the landscape. As his life "rode the earth," it also erodes – comes undone from its "I", becomes one with impersonal being. There is not only a loss of the subjective "I" ("I forgot not only who I was") but moreover there is a loss of consciousness as a *being* differentiated from the world ("I forgot to be"), a relinquishing of consciousness of being. It is here that Molloy (which is a misnomer at this point – there no longer *is* a Molloy) becomes immanence: walls give way that normally separate self from other, man from plant, organic from inorganic, animate from inanimate, and he enters into a zone of Deleuzian "impersonal yet singular being." He becomes noise, embodies roots and stems, the night and the dawn, the movement of the planet, the thaws of winter snows; he is no different than all these, and, likewise, all these – the dawn, night, stems, planet's movement, etc. – are no different from him or each other. He occupies the ultimate intimate relationship with being, thoroughly *knows* these seasons and gardens in a very real sense, as he becomes one with them. In contrast, his being in the sealed jar (where his "I" is composed) "[knows] neither seasons nor gardens" as it remains



anything,” and where the closer one gets to knowing (i.e. pi’s actual and precise number) the closer one gets to zero. Immanence is thus both nothingness of being and infinite being; immanence encompasses the entirety of life in all its infiniteness, but all life is the same, singular, impersonal no-thing.<sup>55</sup>

The semiotics of the cipher – which is both the code that holds infinite potential meanings, *and* the zero – exhibit this paradox of infinite nothingness that characterizes Beckettian immanence. The iconic rendering of the cipher is derived from pi: that is, a circle, or a closed loop. In “The Semantic Construction of the Void” (1999), Renate Lachmann defines the cipher as the paradox of “negativity in positivity.” She writes: “[The cipher], the zero sign, an iconographic hole surrounding an absence like a ring, or a loop, may be called a para-icon of ‘nothing.’ However, its double-edged semantics, at the same time, reverses this zero into a sign denoting not absence but, on the contrary, plenitude and creation” (18). Lachmann underscores the cipher’s “double-edged semantics”: that is, the sign of the zero – the closed loop – on the one hand represents nothingness, the void, and on the other hand, by virtue of its circular inscription, designates a *presence* of nothingness; after all, the written zero signifies nothing through graphic markings. Moreover, many conceptions of zero fuse nothingness with associations of plenitude and creation: recall, for instance, the slang for vagina – *nothing* – in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and in Elizabethan English, which equates nothingness with the space of creation and birth; or the ouroboros – the serpent who eats his own tale – recreates the zero, and also exhibits the zero’s double-edged semantics, creation and destruction at once. Likewise, these “true ciphers” that characterize the space of immanence in *Molloy* suggest that Beckettian immanence is symbiotically related to a particular kind of nothingness: not merely a nihilistic negating force, but also a plentiful void, one that enables potentiality of being.

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<sup>55</sup> For a discussion of Beckett’s play with numbers in his writings, see Kenner (1961, 104-115).

This relationship between nothingness and immanence is drawn many times throughout the novel. In these moments, Molloy (and sometimes, Moran) dissolves into undifferentiated and singular being, which comprises the double-edged semantics of zero: both nothing and infinity at once. For example, Molloy confesses to us, “for it seemed to me nothing at all, and I had no impression of any kind, but simply somewhere something had changed, so that I too had to change, or the world too had to change, in order for nothing to be changed” (88). Here, there is a three-way equation between Molloy, the world, and nothingness: Molloy = World = Nothingness. In other words, when Molloy speaks of nothing, he by proxy speaks of the world and himself – nothing carries with it both the individual and the whole, the singular and the infinite.

Moran, too, experiences infinity in moments of increasing paralysis toward stillness and nothingness:

Yes, when you can neither stand nor sit with comfort, you take refuge in the horizontal, like a child in its mother’s lap. You explore it as never before and find it possessed of unsuspected delights. In short it becomes infinite. [...] Such are the advantages of a local and painless paralysis. And it would not surprise me if the great classical paralyses were to offer analogous and perhaps even still more unspeakable satisfactions. To be literally incapable of motion at last, that must be something! My mind swoons when I think of it. And mute into the bargain! And perhaps deaf as a post! And who knows as blind as a bat! And as likely as not your memory a blank! And just enough brain intact to allow you to exult! And to dread death like a regeneration. (140)

Here, Moran envisions himself increasingly divested of movement, senses, consciousness, and ultimately of being. As he becomes more and more mute, still, silent, empty, void – that is, the

more he is filled with nothing, becomes a blank – the more boundless and detailed becomes experience: “In short, it becomes infinite,” he swooningly exclaims.

Immanent, bare life is thus figured along the double-edged semiotics of the zero in Beckett’s novel. On the one hand, immanence is distinguished by being that is stripped away of any and all identifying elements, being that is nothing, without motion, without voice, without sense, without consciousness – wholly without, a blank (e.g. Moran confesses his “growing resignation to being disposed of self” [149]). On the other hand, Beckettian immanence is characterized by infinite being, which is enabled *by virtue* of blanks and nothingness. As there is a symbiotic relationship between Moran’s escalating paralysis (zeroing of movement) and his ever-growing, increasingly detailed experience of the world (infinity), so there is an interdependent liaison between nothingness and infinite being in Beckett’s depiction of immanence. To chip away at being so as to arrive at *being laid bare* is to also arrive at what all being has in common: to whittle away towards a blankness of being reveals what infinitely exists in all, is to peer at both nothingness and infinity simultaneously. The more Molloy or Moran strip themselves down, the closer they arrive at a zero of being, the more infinite their beings become. They become stems, bicycles, sucking stones, waves; in short, they become all that exists.

As demonstrated, Beckettian immanence is characterized by the double-edged semantics of zero, which signify a mutual relationship between nothingness and infinity. However, there is a third, equally important aspect of immanence in Beckett’s narratives: that is, language. As pared down as Beckett’s characters are, they cannot strip away language; in fact, they are compelled to speak even if they no longer do so in a language man can understand, and they hear a voice in the silence of immanence that utters unspeakable words, words they eventually come to intimately know and embody. For instance, by the end of *Molloy*, Moran has stripped away his

previous identity so fully that he has given up on being a man: “I have been a man long enough, I shall not put up with it any more, I shall not try any more” (175). He is “disposed of self,” now resembles Molloy more than Moran, has left the lights of his house for the comforts of his garden, and is thus drawing closer to an immanent state of being. It is in this bare state of being that Moran begins to hear a peculiar voice that compels him to write:

I have spoken of a voice telling me things. I was getting to know it better now, to understand what it wanted. It did not use the words that Moran had been taught when he was little and that he in his turn had taught to his little one. So that at first I did not know what it wanted. But in the end I understood this language. I understood it, I understood it, all wrong perhaps. That is not what matters. It told me to write the report. (175-176)

Significantly, he now speaks of Moran in the third person: he disassociates his “I” from the identity of “Moran,” signifying that he is no longer the being he once was; perhaps, he has moved from the position of zero’s neighbor, to the position of zero itself (as Cixous repositions Beckett). This current state of being is accompanied by a language that his previous self – the self of man, the human state of being – could not comprehend. It is not a human language, but a language of unaccommodated and undifferentiated being. He has stripped himself of human language, and in doing so, has become aware of another kind of language that grows stronger the more he is “disposed of self.” This indicates that even the barest of existences and the most impersonal of beings cannot be divested of language: one can be “disposed of self,” but one cannot be disposed of language. Language is part and parcel of Beckettian immanence: any experience of being necessitates and compels a telling of being. As long as there is the “world,” there is the “word” within it: wor(l)d.

This obligation to tell and compulsion to narrate cannot be eradicated, even in Beckett's most bare of characters; those without names, without "I"s, without consciousness cannot stop talking, even when they fervently desire silence. Molloy, of course, spends his time writing pages in his mother's bed; he tells us, "What I need now is stories, it took me a long time to know that, and I'm not sure of it" (13). This necessity for stories is much stronger than a desire, as narration is found to be intimately a part of his most bare being – a language he cannot still or eliminate, that is a constituent element of any and all existence: "I listen and the voice is of a world collapsing endlessly" (40). It is not the voice of a man, but the voice of a world and all its composite parts. It narrates the characteristics of its own immanence, tells the story of eternal and undifferentiated being: "It says that here nothing stirs, has never stirred, will never stir, except myself, who do not stir either, when I am there, but see and am seen" (ibid). Here, the voice highlights the nothingness that, as discussed earlier, comprises all existence. It is a voice that, at times, may occupy Molloy, but it not dependent upon or composed by Molloy's being. In fact, Molloy underscores that he has no control over this language, emphasizing that it does not originate in him, but in the world: "It is not a sound like the other sounds, that you listen to, when you choose, and can sometimes silence, by going away or stopping your ears, no, but it is a sound which begins to rustle in your head, without your knowing how, or why" (ibid). If anything, it is a language bound up in the world. As long as there is being – even the barest of existences, as Beckett's narratives demonstrate – there is a compulsion to tell the story of that being. Along with nothingness, language is a composite element of immanence in Beckett's writings.

The immanence of language is perhaps best demonstrated by Moran's bees, whose "dancing" he interprets as a system of signs and symbols. Having spent long hours examining his

bees' movements, Moran determines that they communicate with one another through various rhythms and figures in their flying, and through changes in the tempo and tone of their buzzing. Their communication concerns the building of their hive and the production of honey; in other words, their language accompanies the production of their world, is perhaps *necessary* to the construction of their world. Their "bee dance" allegorically exhibits the way in which language and the world are codependent, even outside of the human realm; language is part of nature, it is an element of all existence – it is immanent. Moran also, in a way, meditates upon the bees' dancing as once might contemplate a God or any other divine figure, but his reverence for the bees' movements nobly exceeds his previous human worship of God. He writes:

And I said, with rapture, Here is something I can study all my life, and never understand. [...] And I admitted with good grace the possibility that this dance was after all no better than the dances of the people of the West, frivolous and meaningless. But for me, sitting near my sun-drenched hives, it would always be a noble thing to contemplate, too noble ever to be sullied by the cogitations of a man like me, exiled in his manhood. And I would never do my bees the wrong I had done my God, to whom I had been taught to ascribe my angers, fears, desires, and even my body. (169)

The nobility of the bees' dancing does not depend upon the potential meaning it may or may not afford; indeed, Moran exhibits no inkling of a hesitation or disappointment when he admits that the dance may, after all, be meaningless. Since the dance's nobility is not predicated upon meaning, we must seek out the source of its nobility elsewhere. It seems its nobility derives from the contemplation it incites (that is, it occupies Moran, presents him an inexhaustible something to endlessly puzzle over), and the fact that it is a system that falls beyond the "cogitation of man." That is, the bees' dance represents a system not reliant upon any human arrangement. It is

also a symbol of infinity (like Molloy's knife rest) whose meaning (or meaninglessness) is without end. In all the bees' dance exemplifies the language of immanence – a language not confined to the human realm but essential in and to the world, unlimited in its possible meanings (infinity) despite its own potential meaninglessness (nothing), and symbiotically a part of being.

In “*Molloy* or the Quest for Meaninglessness: A Global Interpretation” (1975), David Hayman associates the infinite impenetrability of the bees' dance with both the narrative *Molloy* and the character Molloy. He writes,

I have said earlier that Beckett is controversial, that his novels are, like Molloy's knife-rest, symbols of infinity and sources of infinite speculation. *Molloy* may also be described as the unstable mean between the inexplicable object and the equally inexplicable organism, between Molloy's knife-rest and Moran's beehive with the “innumerable dance” of the bees. (156)

Hayman's observes that both Molloy and *Molloy* reside in an ambiguous realm where distinctions between the inorganic (the knife-rest) and the organic (the bees' dance) do not exist; in my estimation, his observation beautifully connects both the novel and the character to immanence. Both the word (*Molloy*) and the world (Molloy) are composed of the same impersonal and undifferentiated being that embodies an infinite number of meanings/beings and yet, at their barest of cores, amount to meaninglessness/nothing. His analysis brings together the ambiguous and bare word with the ambiguous and bare world, which is a staple of Beckettian immanence. Molloy and his narrative, *Molloy*, together exhibit bare life that is compelled to narrate itself; they are immanence of word and flesh.

## VI. Conclusion: Aesthetics of Immanent Nothingness

As Beckettian narrative approaches nothing through its “aesthetics of lessness,” it draws closer not only to the text laid bare, but to being laid bare as well; in other words, the paring down of narrative goes hand-in-hand with the paring down of being, and thus immanence is at once an undifferentiated and impersonal world *and* an undifferentiated and impersonal word. Beckettian immanence is a nothingness that embraces infinite being, and that carries with it a compulsion to narrate. Even immanent nothingness cannot strip itself of the word; the word is bound up with the barest of beings, as if to be at all (whether that being is man or animal, inanimate object or animate subject) requires some kind of narration. Beckett’s project to “tear holes in language” so that “what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – begins to seep through” reveals (or writes) an immanence that is characterized by the paradoxical phenomenon whereby all the somethings add up to nothingness itself, and that is also wholly within language. The language of Beckett’s narration often mimics, in its form, the nothingness that is at its immanent core.

In the beginning of this chapter, I made the claim that immanent nothingness informs many of the noted characteristics of Beckett’s writing, including self-negating statements, a concern with the liminal, assertions of unsayability, the never-ending slippage (or crumbling) of language and identity, “aesthetics of lessness,” and unknowingness. The connection between these elements of Beckett’s style and a concern with nothingness is quite apparent in many cases (e.g. “aesthetics of lessness” very obviously aim to draw closer to nothingness through perpetual diminishment), however a closer analysis of a few of these elements reveals just how they are both enabled by and also write/create immanent nothingness. Thus, having analyzed immanent nothingness within Beckett’s narratives, I now examine how it shapes a few specific elements of

Beckettian style, further solidifying the connection between immanence and language in Beckett's writings.

In "The Calmative" (1946), the post-mortem narrator "I" says, "All I say cancels out, I'll have said nothing" (28). Indeed, Beckettian narrative is often distinguished by self-negating statements that cancel themselves out immediately upon being uttered – as if those statements are pierced through with unknowability or illegitimacy, as if the floor upon which those statements are made has already dropped long ago (think Derrida's bottomless chessboard), or as if those statements have an immanent void at their very core. As Asja Szafraniec argues, "Perhaps, the most consistent feature of [Beckett's] discourse is that it poses or stages its own fundamental questions – questions fundamental to the writing process – and at the same time empties them of any answer" (92). For example, *The Unnamable* begins with the following self-erasing questions that also, in the course of being asked, erase traditional components of the novel, including setting, character, and temporality: "Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving" (291). The speaker asks questions – *where? who? when?*, the most basic novelistic elements – in an unquestioning manner; such unquestioning questions nullify themselves. They remove the ontology of questioning from the question; indeed, what is a question that does not ask? A question voided. He then "unbelievably" answers "I"; in the same way as the unquestioning questions, the unbelieving answers are composed of self-elimination.

These unquestioning questions and unbelieving answers are representative of the self-negating discourse Beckett's writing is noted for. Such self-negating discourse is indicative of immanent nothingness writ large (quite literally so) in Beckett's texts, and enacts the circular semantics of zero that create infinite beings that remain, at their core, the same essential nothing. These self-negating statements at once embody the positive utterance and its negative

counterpart; ultimately, they assert that both are part of the same immanent nothingness whose corresponding language also embodies the unchanging and undifferentiating nothing that contains infinite beings. As the Unnamable says of Malone, “He passes, motionless” (292), so these statements are made of the same paradox: they are uttered (they pass), and yet these utterances are stilled, undermined, silenced by their own self-negating, un-speaking and unspeakable uttering (they are motionless). Continues the Unnamable, “Nothing ever troubles me. And yet I am troubled. Nothing has ever changed since I have been here” (293). His figuring of himself as the troubled “I” who is troubled by nothing performs the statement that negates both the words uttered and the “I” who utters them; that is, the “troubled by nothing” troubled “I” cancels out its ontological state of *being troubled* through the self-negating statement, and thus remains a blank “I” where indeed, “nothing has ever changed,” as well as a blank being.

Other examples of self-negating statements abound throughout Beckett’s work. The best example is probably found in Moran’s last sentences, which ultimately erase and render into a void his entire previous text: “Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining” (176). This statement, of course, echoes the first sentence of his narrative, “It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows” (92), and in so doing ushers the reader back to those opening utterances, which are now negated by his final statement. Thus, all of Moran’s narrative may be read through this self-erasing lens: his final sentence invites us to negate the report we have just read, to consider it as a text voided, as discourse un-written as it is written. This discourse that is un-written as it is written is a literary symptom of immanent nothingness; as the Beckettian world’s core essence is an undifferentiated and infinite nothingness, so the word mimics this, reflects in its form through

self-negating statements the world that is always undoing and always unbecoming, and yet always doing and becoming, into and out of a void.

Another characteristic of Beckettian narrative is a liminology at work within his texts. Recall here Cixous' positioning of Beckett as zero's neighbor, and then her re-positioning of him as zero itself. This to-ing and fro-ing between zero and not-zero mimics the to-and-fro movement between the self and the other (or the unself) in which many of Beckett's characters are engaged. Like Molloy, many of Beckett's characters are liminal beings, suspended along various thresholds that render ambiguous and obsolete traditional binary oppositions between self and other, man and animal, male and female, life and death, etc. Their liminal state is itself a symptom of nothingness.<sup>56</sup> First and foremost, this to-and-fro movement that is characteristic of the liminal position is a movement that adds up to nothing, not unlike the movement of Malone that the Unnamable observes: "He passes, motionless" (292). As many of Beckett's characters are enthralled in a kind of ontological stuckness wherein they move without really moving between first and third person pronouns (e.g. between identifying as "I" and identifying as "he"), so they reflect immanent nothingness. That is, the motionless movement of the liminal position mimics immanent nothingness as univocity of being (motionlessness) that encompasses an always-differentiating process (movement), reflects the condition whereby all the somethings (always-differentiating processes) add up to a singular and impersonal nothingness (univocity of being).

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<sup>56</sup> See also "Chapter Three," wherein I discuss nothing's relationship to the liminal position, as supported by the theories of Victor Turner.

Secondly, one of the most prominent liminalities found within Beckett's oeuvre is the threshold between life and death, or the condition of being "never properly born,"<sup>57</sup> which many critics have commented upon. This liminality between life and death (or between being and nonbeing) is, as we have seen in the instance of Molloy, a clear marker of immanence. While not confined to the moment between life and death (as Deleuze reminds us), immanence is most readily perceived within this moment, as it is a moment when life is stripped to its barest and most essential components. Along these lines, the prevalence of womb thresholds in Beckett's narratives is a way of writing immanence. In "Births for Nothing: Beckett's Ontology of Parturition" (2006), Paul Sheehan discusses the condition of "never properly born" in relation to these "womb thresholds" in Beckett's texts. Beckett, Sheehan tells us, re-envision birth as a liminal and endless process, rather than a definitive event – an "undefined, unexplored passage between gestation and parturition" (181). He writes,

Beckettian space is liminal space, the difference between self and unself. Beckett's thresholds are not access points or any other marker of transience. They are rather non-spaces of attempted habitation, sites of enforced residence. To borrow one of Maurice Blanchot's titles, they signify the step not beyond. The invitation to cross the lower limit implied by a threshold is revoked. (185).

Birth is thus presented as an infinite series of thresholds or as a never-ending passageway. There is no crossing of the threshold or definitive end to the state; instead, these births are "for nothing." That is, they amount to nothing, other than the continual threshold process of birthing

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<sup>57</sup> The source of this phrase "never properly born" is a 1935 Jung lecture that Beckett attended; in this lecture, Jung spoke of a little girl who had not properly been born, and thus by age ten was still immersed in archetypal dreams of a underdeveloped consciousness. As many critics have noted, this notion haunted Beckett, and he returned to it in many of his writings. In *All That Fall*, for example, this lecture and patient are explicitly mentioned. Mrs. Rooney discusses attending a lecture "by one of those new mind doctors" (35), who speaks about one of his patients: "The trouble with her was she had never really been born!" (36). See also Knowlson (1996, 616), and Sheehan (2006).

itself. Ultimately, this liminal state of “never properly born” is an expression of immanent nothingness. Beckett presents being as perpetually unfinished, as stuck in the process of becoming. It is, on the one hand, in a constant movement of becoming, yet on the other hand, it is a constant becoming that never passes into the past-tense definitive of crossing a threshold and thus having become. The constant becoming of being, therefore, adds up to the same nothingness all being has always been. The idea of “never properly born” presents birth as an infinite process; the essence of being is fundamentally a continual transformation that never ultimately transforms (motionless movement). This, again, is Beckettian immanence – nothingness that encompasses infinite being.

Like the Beckettian character whose identity is suspended in a to-and-fro movement between the self and the other (the “I” and the “he”), so Beckettian writing shuttles between reflecting immanent nothingness and producing immanent nothingness, between being an effect of immanence and affecting immanence. On the one hand (as discussed above), Beckett’s writing is symptomatic of immanent nothingness, mimics in its form undifferentiated and singular being. On the other hand, Beckett’s writing – as an epistemological method – generates nothingness. Similar to Molloy’s mathematical calculations of his flatulence that produce the knowledge that he never farts at all, so Beckettian writing and narratives generate the knowledge that one knows nothing, that true knowledge is knowledge of nothingness, which is immanence. If writing, as Merleau-Ponty argues, teaches one what one knows, and thereby constructs the idiom of the writer (“My own words take me by surprise and teach me what I think” [9]), so Beckett’s characters – most of which are compelled by some undetermined force to some kind of discourse – are taught nothing itself through their narratives. “All I know is what the words know” (31), Molloy tells us; of course, what the words know is nothing – they continuously

reflect in their utterances immanent nothingness, as we have seen. Moreover, as characters who teach themselves what they know through their writing and thereby construct themselves as writers, the Beckettian writer becomes an embodiment of nothing. The Beckettian writer ultimately writes about the nothingness that is the world, and thus writes himself as nothingness. He is both nothing itself and nothing reflected, zero and zero's neighbor.

## Chapter Five Writing the Void and Voided Writing in the Works of Victor Pelevin

### I. Post-Soviet Russian Literature, Déjà vu Postmodernism, and Zero-point Literature

The work of Victor Pelevin examines and problematizes the cultural condition of post-Soviet Russia, frequently establishing a mutual dependence between this culture and the declined status of literature within it. Oftentimes utilizing postmodern theories to describe the cultural state, but with a hyperbolic meta-awareness that he is doing so, Pelevin writes novels that enact what I dub “déjà vu postmodernism” – that is, postmodernism that is so familiar that it becomes hyper-aware of itself; it figures as a near-mythologized condition that is rerun in Russia. As such, Pelevin’s novels often set up parameters that infinitely deconstruct themselves as literary art – that attempt, in their literary form, to be expressions of not-literature, and that depict post-Soviet culture as generated by emptiness and embodying nothing itself. These two features of Pelevin’s work – literature that dismantles itself as literature, and a cultural condition of emptiness – point to his major theme: reality is a void. Pelevin thus explores how this empty or voided reality is produced by the postmodern condition and the crises of modernity, and examines both the negative and positive aspects of emptiness.

Broadly speaking, Russian post-Soviet literature affects a kind of deliberate déjà vu in scholars of postmodernism – the distinct notion that this has happened before, only this time it is occurring with crystalline meta-awareness. As we well know, the crisis of meaning occasioned by the world wars and the humanistic terror of modernity’s totalitarian regimes, coupled with the aesthetic dilemma left in the wake of Auschwitz,<sup>58</sup> spurred theories that rejected notions of all-encompassing grand narratives, that delegitimated objective truth, that heralded (and lamented) the rise of the spectacle, that embraced a plurality of cultures, that killed the myths of progress

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<sup>58</sup> See Theodor Adorno’s “Cultural Criticism and Society” (1951), wherein he puts forward the oft-quoted and repeatedly discussed claim, “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (34).

and rationality, and that witnessed the death of God, man, and the author. When the Soviet Union finally fell, the ghosts of totalitarian regimes past were put to rest once again, and the resultant delegitimization of grand narratives and crises of meaning swelled once more – a familiar tale, reenacted. Some scholars, such as Mikhail Epstein (one of the foremost theorists of Russian postmodernism), go so far as to suggest that post-Soviet postmodernism is born of the “same artistic mentality that generated socialist realism” (25), a mentality that has its roots in a traditional Russian paradigm that goes all the way back to at least the tenth century. As Epstein puts it:

The production of reality seems new for Western civilization, but it has been routinely accomplished throughout all of Russian history. Here, ideas have always tended to substitute for reality, beginning, perhaps, with Prince Vladimir, who adopted the idea of Christianity in A.D. 988 and proceeded to implant it in a vast country, where it had been virtually unknown until that time. (27)

Epstein goes on to cite many examples from Russian history that illustrate the “simulative character of Russian civilization in which the plan, the preceding concept, is more real than the production brought forth by that plan” (28). Epstein’s theory is that Russia has always been organized according to principles that we now dub “postmodern”; however, we should qualify his thesis by noting that it is only in the twentieth century, and especially with the fall of the Soviet Union, that these principles are made apparent. An awareness that one exists in a simulative condition is a prerequisite for a postmodern condition; without this awareness, one can still function as a modern. As Mark Lipovetsky, another leading scholar of Russian postmodernism, explains in response to Epstein’s thesis, “From what is this notion of the simulative consciousness of Socialist Realism derived? Naturally, from today’s – postmodern –

experience. Within Socialist Realist discourse the category of simulacrum simply does not function” (12).

As awareness increases of the postmodern condition, looking back throughout history reveals the pervasive, yet unconscious, simulative condition of culture; the present collapse of ideology therefore feels like a rerun of collapsed ideologies past. This may explain the sense of re-witnessing the death of an already-transpired-long-ago ideology that is captured in a great deal of post-Soviet literature and art. Moreover, despite the fact that most Western postmodern theory was not readily accessible in the Soviet Union nor translated into Russian until the 1990s, Soviet underground art and literature of the sixties, seventies, and eighties display remarkable similarities with Western postmodernism, even though these underground movements developed largely in isolation from any outside influences. “Sots-art” of the early 1970s, for example, mocked overwrought Soviet clichés, images, and ideology by presenting them alongside imagery of high art and consumer culture. Pieces like Aleksandr Kosalapov’s “Symbols of the Century” (1982), which depicts an image of Lenin alongside Coca-Cola’s logo, or Komar and Melamid’s “The Yalta Conference (From a History Textbook, 1984)” (1982), which portrays ET, Stalin, and a secretive Hitler instead of Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin, employ a kind of pastiche that merges sacred images of Socialist Realism with the profane images of pop and consumer culture. Such pieces exhibit what we now define as characteristics of postmodernism, but were created in their own underground movement largely cut off from Western postmodernist theories. Additionally, literary works such as Andre Bitov’s *Pushkin House* (1964-71; not published in the USSR until 1988) and Venedikt Erofeev’s *Moscow to the End of the Line* (1970) have been securely inducted into the postmodern canon, even though, like their counterparts in the visual arts, they were not directly influenced by postmodern philosophy. Bitov’s *Pushkin House* tells

the story of a young literary scholar, Lyova, who discovers, after accidentally destroying a number of relics in the Pushkin House museum, that those apparently sacred and authentic artifacts connected to the life of Russia's most revered and celebrated poet were themselves fraudulent – copies and forgeries of originals now lost or never-having existed (even Pushkin's death mask is revealed to be a fake!). To the reader familiar with postmodernist theories, such a story functions as a fitting allegory of many postmodern ideas; as Rolf Hellebust argues, "In fact, the first impression of a Western reader exposed to *Pushkin House* is that the author seems to have used the subversive literary devices of every postmodern writer he has read as well as some he has not" (267). Erofeev's *Moscow to the End of the Line* is often noted for its carnivalesque character, which is a paradigm firmly rooted in postmodern literature. Lipovetsky argues that Erofeev's novel has influenced "the entire subsequent development of Russian postmodernism and contemporary Russian literature" (67), especially in its handling of various levels of chaos, which comes to "signify a higher divine logic" (78). Finally, we may add to this list of Soviet writers and artists whose work exhibits postmodern tendencies despite their isolation from Western postmodern theories Vasily Aksyonov, Ilya Kabakov, Daniil Kharms, Vladimir Makanin, Sasha Sokolov, and Konstantin Vaginov, among others.

It follows, then, that something resembling Western postmodernism appeared in the Soviet underground decades prior to the widespread availability of those postmodern theories in the artistic, literary, and philosophical circles of Soviet Russia. As such, when those Western theories were finally ushered into Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many Russian writers and artists discovered in postmodernism a familiar articulation of their cultural condition. Postmodernism in Russia is therefore accompanied by a hyper-awareness that all this – the delegitimization of grand narratives, the simulative nature of reality – has happened before.

In particular, post-Soviet literature that explores the cultural space and condition of post-Soviet Russia is often doubly-aware of its postmodern predicaments. Pelevin is the pioneer of this hyper-aware postmodern prose.

I should emphasize that I do not intend to reduce all of post-Soviet literature to postmodernism, but rather want to argue that a certain strain of post-Soviet literature that examines the cultural condition in light of postmodern theories and aesthetics does so in a way that is almost over-aware of its postmodernist leanings. Pelevin's writings, specifically, noted for their "non-acceptance of anything absolute and his insistence on an all-encompassing relativity," rank dominantly in the company of postmodern Russian literature.<sup>59</sup> In particular, the ethical dilemma of aesthetics is made hyper-aware for many writers, including Pelevin, whose work examines Russia after the Soviet Union. Russian and Soviet literature had long enjoyed the status as the real keeper of truth, and oftentimes figured as the valid counterpoint to official tsarist and Soviet regimes. Russian and Soviet authors have indeed instilled a number of rich ideas beyond the realms of their literary texts and into the material culture. As Alexander Etkind reminds us, Russian and Soviet authors wrote as "engineers of men's souls," "presenting the people as God-bearers and the tsar as the Antichrist, inventing 'Christian socialism' (Sergei Bulgakov) and the 'leap over capitalism,' [...] and dubbing the Thaw the Thaw (Ilya Ehrenburg)" (7). The term "genius" is generously applied to Russian writers, who have traditionally enjoyed a near-sacred status in their country. For instance, critics and layman alike speak of a "Pushkin Cult" in Russia, and many scholars have written about the "holiness" that Pushkin's image has acquired.<sup>60</sup> In a

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<sup>59</sup> Mørch, Audun J. "Reality as Myth: Pelevin's *Сараев i Pustota*" (2005, 62).

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Nikolai Gogol's «Несколько слов о Пушкине», an article widely anthologized in Russian school textbooks; it remains a central piece for the cult of Pushkin to this day. Also, Helena Goscilo nicely sums up the development and importance of the Pushkin cult in Russia: "For Russians, not idolizing Pushkin is tantamount to betraying Russia, abrogating all human values, or involuntarily

tradition so strongly marked by the notion that literature safeguards ideals that the world should strive to live up to, and depicts truths upon which society should structure itself, it becomes particularly difficult to believe in the idealistic power of literature after witnessing not only the Holocaust, but the horror and collapse of the Soviet regime. As Adorno famously asked whether or not it is possible – or ethical – to write poetry after totalitarianism, after witnessing how modern and progressive ideals affected, enabled, and inspired all-too-real horror in empirical existence, so many post-Soviet writers compose with an awareness that they are either engaged in a fool’s errand (there are no ideals left to celebrate and promote), or that they are playing with fire, and therefore attempt to write novels that refuse to be literature. To produce novels that are not novels suggests a production and expression of nothingness, which becomes a familiar and urgent theme in a dominant thread of post-Soviet literature.

This “dilemma of aesthetics” is very much present in Pelevin’s novels, which are, on the one hand, strongly influenced by the revered place of Russian literature, and, on the other hand, very much aware of the terror of totalitarianism produced by a regime that famously “strove to make fairytales reality.” I will argue that Pelevin’s writing attempts to alleviate this aesthetic dilemma sometimes by denying his novels their status as literary art (*Generation “P”*), and other times by deconstructing his novels in a way that makes the word (ideology) and the world equal products of one another (*Chapaev and Voyd*, *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*). His novels and “not-novels” also resurrect scores of Russian and Soviet literary and cultural giants – from Dostoevsky to Mayakovsky, and from Chapaev to Che Guevara – but rewrite their ideological

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revealing crass imperviousness to aesthetics. The process of the poet’s canonization, launched by the Pushkin Celebration of 1880, was consolidated in the ensuing 100-odd years by official campaigns orchestrated to capitalize economically and politically on Pushkin’s name and its totem powers. [...] The state ensured that the poet became and remained *our* Pushkin – a national treasure, not only the fountainhead and acme of Russian art, but the slippery signifier invoked to legitimate whatever ideology dominates at a given moment” (81). See also Marcus Levitt’s *Russian Literary Politics and the Pushkin Celebration of 1880* (1989).

messages to echo the same non-thing: the void is the only truth. As such, Pelevin employs novelistic paradigms and form (such as polyphony, carnivalization, and abjection), and the ideological heavyweights of Russian and Soviet literature, but he does so in a way that either removes their ideological power to inspire and affect change on reality, or demonstrates how their power is an expression of their cultural condition. This chapter will explore this phenomenon of Pelevin's writing, and attempt to answer whether or not Pelevin presents the current cultural condition and status of literature as something to be lamented. That is, to what extent is the void a crisis of postmodern culture, and to what extent is it salvation from modernity?

The void is a paradoxical and complicated concept in Pelevin's writings, just as the eponymous "P" of his novel *Generation "P"* (1999)<sup>61</sup> is an ambiguous referent, suggesting a number of possible meanings. Most obviously, "P" stands for Pepsi, and "Generation P" offers a Russian analogue for Douglas Coupland's (and, by proxy, the West's) "Generation X."<sup>62</sup> In Pelevin's version, "children of the Soviet seventies chose Pepsi in precisely the same way as their parents chose Brezhnev" (1).<sup>63</sup> This indicates a generation whose identity and ideology are defined by consumer culture, marketing, and branding. However, Pelevin, while acknowledging that the "P" may stand for Pepsi, has also suggested in an interview that the "P" stands for the obscene term "pizdets," whose linguistic root is one of the most vulgar words in the Russian

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<sup>61</sup> The novel has been translated into English both as *Babylon* (London, 2001) and as *Homo Zapiens* (New York, 2002). I will refer to the novel as *Generation "P"* throughout this chapter. I largely use the American version of the text for any English translations, with my own amendments when needed.

<sup>62</sup> See Douglas Coupland's *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991). For a comparative analysis of Coupland's and Pelevin's novels, see Sally Dalton-Brown's "The Dialectics of Emptiness: Douglas Coupland's and Viktor Pelevin's Tales of Generation X and P" (2006).

<sup>63</sup> «и дети советских семидесятых выбирали «Пепси» точно так же, как их родители выбирали Брежнева» (9).

language: “pizda,” meaning “cunt.” “Pizdets” generally means “the end of everything,” or, to be more literarily crass, a “cuntastrophe.” As such, “Generation Pizdets” is a generation that has come to a vulgar end – “a generation that faces catastrophe,” proposes Pelevin.<sup>64</sup> In that same interview, Pelevin puts forward yet another interpretation of the “P,” Putin, but then concedes, “it’s whatever you like.” In other words, the “P” can signify whatever one wants or needs it to signify; it has no stable meaning of its own.<sup>65</sup> Which points to still another understanding of the “P”: as the critic Sally Dalton-Brown notes, it may stand for “pustota,” which means “emptiness” or “void” (246n12). Indeed, “pustota” is a central theme in Pelevin’s writings, not only blatantly foregrounded in one of his earliest novels, *Chapaev and Pustota/Voyd* (1996), but also recurring throughout his literary oeuvre up till the present day. Of course, the concept of “emptiness” also figures predominantly in Pelevin’s well-known study and practice of Buddhism.<sup>66</sup>

Thus, the novel’s title may signify a brand-crazed generation defined by capitalistic consumerism (“Pepsi”), a dead, already-ended, catastrophic generation without meaning or direction (“pizdets”), and a generation of emptiness (“pustota”). While these various understandings of the meaning of “P” may seem to contradict one another, I would like to suggest that they are unified in the concept of nothingness that permeates Pelevin’s writings. While “Pepsi” and “pizdets” represent a nihilistic form of nothingness that results from (the loss of) grand narratives such as Soviet communism and post-Soviet capitalism, “pustota” represents a spiritual form of nothingness that may provide meaning, beauty, agency, and respite to those

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<sup>64</sup> See Pelevin’s interview, “I never was a hero,” in *The Observer* (April 30, 2000). <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/apr/30/fiction>

<sup>65</sup> Mikhail Sverdlov also argues that the title’s “II” could signify Pi.

<sup>66</sup> For a discussion of the Buddhist elements of Pelevin’s writings and philosophy, see Joseph Mozur’s “Viktor Pelevin: Post-Sovism, Buddhism, & Pulp Fiction” (2002).

mired in the nihilistic nothingness of Pelevin's world. In fact, Pelevin's fiction repeatedly demonstrates how nothingness is both the crisis of and the salvation from modern day existence.

In what follows, I analyze three of Pelevin's most famous novels – *Chapaev and Voyd*, *Generation "P"*, and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* (2004) – demonstrating how nothingness is both a predicament of today's world, and the means to transcendence. *Chapaev and Voyd* and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* focus more upon the empowering and freeing condition of nothingness, whereas *Generation "P"* highlights the abject terror and meaninglessness inherent in the nihilistic nothingness produced by an ideology-ridden society (in this specific case, capitalism). When we look at the trajectory of these three novels, we find that Pelevin begins by exploring the positive aspects of the void with *Chapaev and Voyd* in 1996, then shifts to the nihilistic and pessimist void in 1999's *Generation "P"*, then returns to a more optimistic treatment of the void in 2004 with *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*; I will return to the meaning of this trajectory at this chapter's conclusion. Finally, all three novels function as narratives produced by the void, and also indicate how the void produces reality. As such, Pelevin's commentary on the void is not limited to the content of his novels, but is reflected in their form as well.

## **II. Nihilistic, Unproductive Nothingness in *Generation "P"***

*Generation "P"* presents a newly post-Soviet Moscow that is simultaneously grappling with the loss of Soviet society, and with the official ushering of capitalism into the place where Soviet ideology once reigned. Pelevin presents this situation in both comic and horrific lights: on the one hand, the replacement of Soviet ideology with capitalism provides ample material for the celebratory and carnivalesque mocking of any ideological system that dictates reality; on the other hand, the situation reveals the lack of stable meaning and dearth of truth in the world, which causes in Pelevin's hero, Vavilen Tatarsky, feelings of horror and abjection. This shift

from one ideology to another, and the accompanying influx of media and consumerism, blur so greatly the distinctions between high and low culture (high art is used to market cheap goods), between self and object (you are what you buy), and between politics and propaganda (the media controls the political) that nothing harbors secure meaning. It is in this way that nothingness takes center-stage in Pelevin's post-Soviet Russia: through the perpetual deconstruction of various binary oppositions – a deconstruction that is fueled by capitalism – society loses its stable foundation of meaning-making structures. *Generation "P"* demonstrates how capitalism produces a nihilistic nothingness, and renders its subjects empty vessels through which to channel money, which is, of course, another type of nothingness.

One method Pelevin employs to demonstrate the consequent meaninglessness caused by the replacement of one ideology for another, and capitalism's production of nothingness, is to utilize sacred cultural emblems to advertise goods and generate profit. The use of art and high literature, in particular, for such monetary and consumer ends, undermines the ideals and disinterestedness of art itself: art is no longer the decision of an aesthetic judgment, which operates by virtue of the fact that there is no yardstick by which to measure or judge the worth of art; nor is art anymore the vessel of the ideal. Instead, art becomes something used to make money, which in turn renders art the sum of its monetary worth. We see both sides of this – art employed to generate money, and money giving worth to art – throughout Pelevin's novel.

For example, the protagonist Tatarsky creates an advertisement for the Gap chain of clothing stores in which Anton Chekhov is shown with his bare legs splayed, creating the outline of a gap. The advertisement reads, "RUSSIA WAS ALWAYS NOTORIOUS FOR THE GAP BETWEEN CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION. NOW THERE IS NO MORE CULTURE, NO MORE CIVILIZATION. THE ONLY THING THAT REMAINS IS THE GAP. THE WAY

THEY SEE YOU” (63).<sup>67</sup> The use of a pants-less Chekhov to advertise a brand known for its jeans implies the degradation (literally, the bringing down to the lower-bodily stratum) of a symbol of Russian literature, and also suggests the urgent need for this degraded, pants-less symbol to improve its grade and fill its lack by purchasing a pair of jeans at the Gap. High art is in need of a new image and ideology, one that can be bought, embodied in a brand name, and resold to others. Furthermore, the advertisement’s turn on the pun – the Gap (the store) and the gap (a figuration of nothingness) – allows for a significant double reading: the first, that nothing remains but the Gap, that is consumerism; the second, that nothing remains but the gap, that is nothing itself. The products of capitalism – consumerism and nothingness – become synonymous, even indistinguishable.

Throughout the novel, Tatarsky creates many similar advertisements that utilize high art to market brand names, and that ultimately point to an underlying nothingness in the cultural condition. In contrast, when art is not used as fodder for advertisements, but instead is presented as a valuable object in its own right, the art itself is not actually presented at all; a description of the piece and a price tag are displayed in its place.

“And this one?” [Tatarsky] asked, indicating the next sheet of paper with a text and seal.

“Oh,” said Alla, “that’s the pride of our collection. It’s a Goya – the Maja with a fan in the garden. Acquired from a certain small museum in Castile. Once again Oppenheim and Radler certify the price – eight and a half million. Astonishing.” (232)<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> In the original Russian version of the novel, the advertisement is written in English, so as to preserve the play of words.

<sup>68</sup> «– А это? – спросил он, указывая на соседний лист бумаги с текстом и печатью. – О, – сказала Алла, – это наша жемчужина. Это Гойя, мотив Махи с веером в саду. Приобретена в одном

Art's worth has been reduced to its monetary value: as Tatarsky's curator explains, Russia has invented a new wave of art called "monetaristic minimalism" (ibid). As a result, art, which used to transcend any measurement of worth, has been reduced or "minimalized" to a single measurement – how much one pays for it. Of course, it has been well theorized that money itself has no inherent value, as it is a signifier of value and nothing else. As such, art has not only been minimalized to a price tag, but moreover the price tag itself is without worth. Art signifies money, and so it signifies nothing.

Furthermore, the pieces of art represented by the price tags may not actually exist. Tatarsky's curator describes paintings and sculptures that are similar to real artworks by artists such as Goya, Picasso, and Velasquez. However, the descriptions do not perfectly match up to existing pieces. It appears that what is described by the curator are artworks that seem like they very well could exist (they have characteristics of well-known works by Goya, Picasso, and Velasquez), but in fact do not. With this possibility in mind, I would like to suggest in Pelevin's novel, there is no artwork actually for sale behind the price tag. In Tatarsky's world, art has literally been minimized, reduced to its price tag; nothing exists besides its monetary value, and this is what is truly meant by "monetaristic minimalism." This scene serves as a metaphor for what Pelevin perceives as the newfound status of art in post-Soviet Russian culture: it is only as valuable as its monetary worth. As I soon will demonstrate, this "monetaristic minimalism" applies to his own novel – *Generation "P"* – as well.

The situation of art in post-Soviet Russia demonstrates on a microcosmic level the cultural condition of this world at large. The utilization of art for consumerist ends mimics the ideological shifting of Soviet communism to post-Soviet capitalism. Such a shift – art to

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маленьком кастильском музее. Опять – таки «Оппенхайм энд Радлер» не даст соврать – восемь с половиной миллионов. Изумительно» (326).

marketing, communism to capitalism – blurs the lines between traditionally distinct binary oppositions, thereby destabilizing meaning and truth. The result is that nothing, literally, remains: “the gap is all that’s left.” Nothingness is generated all the more by the reign and functioning of capitalism, which, as Pelevin demonstrates, reduces all to its monetary worth. In the extreme cases, as discussed above, the object for sale does not even have to exist as long as its price tag – the image of its monetary worth – does. Pelevin writes a world where the deconstructing of binary oppositions has left in its wake a nihilistic nothingness, in which capitalism is quite at home due to its own coveting, buying, and selling of images (the price) instead of substance (the art).

The wave of “monetaristic minimalism” that has swept through the realm of art parallels man’s evolution from *Homo sapiens* to *Homo zapiens* (from a television “zapper”) in the novel. Pelevin presents man as existing in a condition where binary oppositions are revealed to be chimeras; that is, “the dualism that imposes the division into subject and object [...] has never existed and never will” (77).<sup>69</sup> It follows that man is no longer able to perceive himself as separate from the objects around him, many of which attempt to market themselves as expressions of his “self.” Illustrative of this new state is “The Path to Your Self,” the fittingly-named store Tatarsky stumbles upon that sells, among other items, t-shirts that advertise one’s personal rebellions and beliefs; that is, the store sells one’s image – who one will become. “The Path to Your Self” is otherwise the name of every store and brand Tatarsky encounters, from The Gap to Reebok, all of which promise “Your Self” in exchange for purchasing their products. *You are what you buy* becomes quite literal in Tatarsky’s world, just as art is reduced to how much one will pay for it.

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<sup>69</sup> «дуализм, заставляющий делить на субъект и объект то, чего на самом деле никогда не было и не будет» (116).

As such, man is no longer able to distinguish himself from the spectacle surrounding him, which includes advertisements, branding, media, and television: man no longer perceives a difference between the reality that is the material world, and the reality that is the material world as seen on television. This new condition of man is dubbed “collective non-existence” and the “unreal”:

But it is not merely unreal (this word is in effect applicable to everything in the human world). There are no words to describe the degree of its unreality. It is a heaping of one unreality upon another, a castle constructed of air, the foundations of which stand upon a profound abyss. [...] The position of modern man is not merely lamentable; one might even say there is no condition, because man hardly exists. Nothing exists to which one could point and say: “There, that is *Homo Zapiens*.” *HZ* is simply the residual luminescence of a soul fallen asleep; it is a film about the shooting of another film, shown on a television in an empty house. (80, 82)<sup>70</sup>

Man’s new non-condition is reminiscent of art’s material minimalism. As paintings and statues – art’s material and visual nature – have been exchanged for price tags, so *Homo sapiens* have evolved into *Homo zapiens*: that is, men that can hardly be called men, that can not even be said to exist, as they are nothing but a conglomeration of images and brands that are themselves built upon a “heaping of one unreality upon another.”

There is a certain irony that permeates this non-condition of man and reality: whereas the new state of unreality and nonexistence reduces the artwork of the past (that is, meaningful

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<sup>70</sup> «Но он не просто нереален (это слово, в сущности, приложимо ко всему в человеческом мире). Нет слов, чтобы описать степень его нереальности. Это нагромождение одного несуществования на другое, воздушный замок, фундаментом которого служит пропасть. [...] Положение современного человека не просто плачевно – оно, можно сказать, отсутствует, потому что человека почти нет. Не существует ничего, на что можно было бы указать, сказав: «Вот, это и есть *Homo Zapiens*». *XZ* – это просто остаточное свечение люминофора уснувшей души; это фильм про съемки другого фильма, показанный по телевизору в пустом доме» (119, 121).

images) to naught, the present non-condition is characterized as a world in which only the image exists. The difference is that in the past, images could sell to themselves (and to the world beyond their frames) notions of implied inner content, relevance, and truth; in contrast, today's images sell only the idea of the image itself, which is "moth eaten." As Tatarsky muses, "Now, no matter how sincerely you wished to deceive yourself, it was virtually impossible to believe in any correspondence between the image that was being sold and its implied inner content. It was an empty form that had long ago ceased to mean what it should have meant. Everything was moth-eaten" (50).<sup>71</sup> In the original Russian text, Pelevin emphasizes through italics the "pustaya" (empty) form of today's images that comprise the current state of being. These moth-eaten and empty images determine through branding the character, experience, and substance of their generation. The irony is that in a culture driven and defined by images, the images have lost any and all connection to meaning and truth. These "pustaya" forms bear no resemblance to the artwork of the past, which at least carried with them implicit belief in their own significance and relevance to reality. Rather, the inability to believe in a reality and truth beyond the image has given birth to a world ridden with and controlled by hollow forms and soulless *Homo sapiens* – an empty and unreal generation, Generation Pepsi and Pizdets and Pustaya all at once. To paraphrase Pelevin, the condition of modern man would be lamentable, if modern man could still be said to exist at all. By the end of the novel, Tatarsky fulfills this fate of modern man by being himself reduced to the servile adjunct of his own televised image.

Throughout *Generation "P"*, Pelevin repeatedly returns to this notion that man and reality no longer exist as a result of the forces of capitalism. This capitalism is figured as an all-

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<sup>71</sup> «Сейчас, даже при искреннем желании обмануться, почти невозможно было поверить в соответствие продаваемого внешнего подразумеваемому внутреннему. Это была *пустая* форма, которая уже давно не значила того, что должна была значить по номиналу. Все съела моль» (78, emphasis in the original).

consuming and all-being oranus. As humans have evolved to the post-reality state of *Homo sapiens*, they now exist only insofar as they are characterized (given an identity) by images; that is, they only exist to the extent that they are branded. The economic, advertising, and consumerist impulses that compel *Homo sapiens* to purchase their identities and experiences (and thereby come into being), along with the sum total of *Homo sapiens* themselves (which continue to want to be, and establish their beings, through further purchases), together comprise a giant, all-encompassing oranus (or, moutharse). Each *Homo sapien* equals a single cell of the oranus, whose existence depends entirely upon a continuous flow of money streaming through it. To ensure that money is constantly exchanged between each of its cells, the oranus has developed a central nervous system known as the media, whose never-ceasing advertisements fuel the *Homo sapiens*' desires to buy and sell. Besides its *raison d'être* – to perpetuate a stream of money – the oranus has no other characteristic or function; it itself is an emblem of zero, a signifier and conveyor of nothing.

Oranus has neither ears, nor nose, nor eyes, nor mind. And of course, it is far from being the embodiment of evil or the spawn of hell that many representatives of the religious business would have it be. In itself it wishes for nothing, since it is simply incapable of wishing in the abstract. It is an inane polyp, devoid of emotion or intention, which ingests and eliminates emptiness. (84)<sup>72</sup>

Again, *pustota*/emptiness is reiterated as the definitive nature of all things in the new cultural non-condition. The void is the culminating product of capitalism, the essence of man, the status of art and culture, and the only truth and reality in the novel's post-Soviet world.

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<sup>72</sup> «У орануса нет ни ушей, ни носа, ни глаз, ни ума. И он, конечно же, вовсе не является воплощением зла или исчадием ада, как утверждают многие представители религиозного бизнеса. Сам по себе он ничего не желает, так как просто не способен желать отвлеченного. Это бессмысленный полип, лишенный эмоций или намерений, который глотает и выбрасывает пустоту» (126).

In *Generation "P"*, then, Pelevin diagnoses post-Soviet culture much in the same way as Western postmodernists characterize twentieth-century Western culture. Derrida and Foucault, among others, have long theorized the vanishing of the subject in postmodern existence, an idea Pelevin presents through the transition of man from *Homo sapiens* to *Homo zapiens*. Baudrillard writes extensively on the simulative nature of reality, and this crisis of meaning occasioned by the rule of consumerism and commercial images is a common theme in Western postmodernism, especially in the work of Jameson. However, Pelevin figures these postmodern notions quite literally, not just as a metaphor: art is no longer displayed in galleries, and humans can no longer be said to exist. In her excellent study, "From Homo Sovieticus to Homo Zapiens: Viktor Pelevin's Consumer Dystopia" (2008), Sofya Khagi argues, "If Baudrillard still leaves room for a metaphorical reading of his provocative thesis about the Gulf War, with some provisional 'reality' beyond the virtual warfare presented for the benefit of the populace, then Pelevin's politicians are literally disembodied" (563). Moreover, Pelevin develops his postmodern theories with a Russian twist, one which inserts a meta-awareness into the system that displays how all existence is, and always has been, empty, and how all cultural conditions have really been non-conditions; only the realization that such is the case is new. This focus on the emptiness inherent in culture is a staple of Russian postmodernism, an early manifestation of which appears in the sots-art movement. "Sots-art" is a term coined in 1972 by the Russian artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid to refer to their work that combines pop art with imagery from Socialist Realism. An intentional play off of Andy Warhol's "pop art," sots-art likewise utilizes images from popular culture and brings them into a sacred space (e.g. the museum, Soviet ideology). However, while one of the motivations of pop art is to replace the reality of an object with its sign or brand name, in the east, the goal is to reveal the inherent emptiness of Socialist reality.

The main distinction between Russian *sots-art* and its Western counterpart is the former's insistence on "emptiness as the ultimate signified of all signifieds" (Epstein, *After the Future*, 200). As Ilya Kabakov, one of the foremost Russian conceptualists, writes,

In contrast with the West, the principle of "one thing instead of another" does not exist and is not in force, most of all because in this binomial the definitive, clear second element, this "another," does not exist. It is as if in our country it has been taken out of the equation, it is simply not there. [...] What we get is a striking paradox, nonsense: things, ideas, facts inevitable with great exertion enter into direct contact with the unclear, the undefined, in essence with emptiness. This contiguity, closeness, touchingness, contact with nothing, emptiness makes up, we feel, the basic peculiarity of "Russian conceptualism." (247)

Russian conceptualism explores the nothingness that makes up existence. In "Like a Corpse in the Desert" (1987), Epstein reiterates Kabakov's view when he describes conceptualist poetry as "the poetry of crossed-out words, words that cancel themselves out at the moment of utterance, as if devoid of meaning. [...] They present the riddle of self-manifest emptiness" (136). And in 1999, Alexander Genis famously described the cultural condition of Russia through the metaphor of a "cored onion" – a culture with many layers surrounding an absent center:

Here, in the 1990s [...] we may draw on a new metaphor, signaling the emergence of a new cultural paradigm, born of the emptiness or *nothingness* that was perceived as fatal to the earlier paradigm. [...] In the paradigm of the onion, the emptiness at the center is not a cemetery but a source of meaning. This is the cosmic zero point, around which being germinates. This emptiness, which is both everything and nothing, is the focus of

the world. The world is made possible only because of the emptiness at its center. It structures being, bestows form on things, and allows things to function. (411)

As we will see, Genis' optimistic view of nothingness as the ultimate potentiality, or creative force, is present in a handful of Pelevin's novels, including *Chapaev and Voyd* and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*.

However, this optimism is largely absent in *Generation "P"*; instead, the atmosphere and narrative style of the novel pivot back and forth between carnivalesque carousing and abject horror, ultimately offering neither meaning nor salvation from meaninglessness. The aesthetics and mood of this post-Soviet non-condition are at once distinguished by both Bakhtin's notions of the carnival, and by Kristeva's theories of abjection. Pelevin's novel reveals how carnival and abjection are two sides of the same coin, and share at their core a liminal state of zero – neither absence nor presence of being, but an utterly ambiguous, *empty/pustoi being* (e.g. moth-eaten images, soulless *Homo sapiens*). Pelevin's empty world is one that is caught between existence and non-existence, as only the image exists to conceal a hollow carcass underneath: a world populated by *Homo sapiens* that share a kinship with zombies (the undead) and Internet presences (cyber-identities).<sup>73</sup> These liminal and out-of-bounds states of carnival and abjection have become permanent features of Pelevin's post-Soviet empty world: the perpetual deconstruction of binary oppositions highlights the fleeting nature of meaning and the nonexistence of transcendental truth, which, on the one hand, is accompanied by revelry in the freedom produced by the release from officialdom, and, on the other hand, incites terror in the face of borderless existence. As such, a full appreciation of Pelevin's conception of this *Generation Pustota*, or, this non-condition of culture, must take into account how his notions of

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<sup>73</sup> Comparisons may also be drawn between the image-laden and simulative nature of the world as depicted in Pelevin's novel, and Guy Debord's study *Society of the Spectacle* (1967).

emptiness are intimately related to theories of carnival and abjection. Emptiness, carnival, and the object together comprise an aesthetic trinity in *Generation P*.

Much of the imagery, plotting, and characters of Pelevin's post-Soviet empty world seemed plucked from the aesthetic arsenal of Bakhtin's notions of carnival. First of all, as discussed earlier, the sacred (high culture, art, literature, religion, God, truth, etc.) is ubiquitously combined with the profane (low culture, everydayness, advertisements, ribald jokes, cigarettes, drugs, sex, etc.) in Pelevin's novel; the degradation of the sacred is, of course, one of the chief elements of the carnivalesque tradition.<sup>74</sup> Secondly, the novel presents a world in which the spectacle (images) has taken the place of reality. This is another important motif in the carnival: a spectacle without spectators, wherein everyone is a participant in a sweeping performance that has become the world.<sup>75</sup> The power and authority of the spectacle is emphasized repeatedly throughout the novel, and not just at the end when Tatarsky is subjected to his televised image. For instance, when Morkovin takes Tatarsky to Daft Podium, he shows him an expensive Silicon Graphics computer installed with a Soft Image program that is twice as expensive as the computer itself; the images are literally more valued than the material machine that displays them. Another time, Tatarsky meets a client who "looked remarkably like the image that had taken shape in Tatarsky's mind following the previous day's conversation" (13).<sup>76</sup> It is implied that Tatarsky's imagined picture of the client actually dictates the client's fleshy appearance.

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<sup>74</sup> Bakhtin writes that the essential principle of grotesque realism and the carnivalesque is "the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body their indissoluble unity" (19-20).

<sup>75</sup> "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it" (Bakhtin 7).

<sup>76</sup> «Клиент [...] был удивительно похож на тот образ, который сложился в голове у Татарского после вчерашнего разговора» (28).

This notion is reiterated later in the novel when Tatarsky realizes that his imagination shapes the so-called reality around him:

Tatarsky could sense that his thoughts were filled with such power that each one was a stratum of reality [...] As soon as he had the thought about the confusion of tongues, it became clear to him that the memory of Babylon was the only possible Babylon: by thinking about it, he had summoned it to life; and the thoughts in his head were like trucks loaded with building materials, rushing towards Babylon, making it more and more substantial. (37)<sup>77</sup>

I would like to suggest that when Tatarsky meditates upon Babylon, and thereby summons it into being, he is, by proxy, meditating upon and therefore creating himself (recall that his given name is Vavilen, which echoes the Russian pronunciation of the biblical Babylon – it is pronounced with a “V” instead of a “B,” “Vavylon”). Another carnivalesque element consists of parodic pantomimes of official figures that have taken the place of all official figures – reminiscent of the jester’s replacement of the king during carnival.<sup>78</sup> For instance, Tatarsky discovers that Russia’s president Boris Yeltsin has long been dead, and that the Boris Yeltsin that continues to serve as president is actually a digital dummy of the man whose jester-like antics – perpetual drunkenness, stumbling over important foreign and state officials, continual mess-making – are the combined efforts of advertisers and television executives who strive to secure high ratings. Lastly, while the novel’s oranus is analogous to the collective and unfinished grotesque body of

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<sup>77</sup> «Татарский чувствовал, что его мысли полны такой силы, что каждая из них – это пласт реальности [...] Как только он подумал о смешении языков, ему стало ясно, что воспоминание о Вавилоне и есть единственный возможный Вавилон: подумав о нем, он тем самым вызвал его к жизни. И мысли в его голове, как грузовики со стройматериалом, понеслись в сторону этого Вавилона, делая его все вещественнее и вещественнее» (60).

<sup>78</sup> Bakhtin writes that during carnival, “the jester was proclaimed king, a clownish abbot, bishop, or archbishop was elected at the ‘fest of fools,’ and in the churches directly under the pope’s jurisdiction a mock pontiff was even chosen” (81).

the carnival tradition, there are two significant differences: one, whereas Bakhtin's notion of the "grotesque body" is the literal embodiment of the corporeal condition of the world during carnival time, Pelevin's oranus is a figurative representation of the non-condition of post-Soviet culture; and two, the grotesque body is temporary, and only exists for the period of carnival, while the oranus is a seemingly permanent fixture of Pelevin's world. In all, these signifiers and motifs of carnival found throughout the novel are expressions of the culture's emptiness and non-condition. The freedom produced by the collapse of universal truths, and by the deconstruction of binary oppositions, renders the world topsy-turvy, equalizes high and low cultures, and unleashes a celebratory, blithe mood.

However, in this permanent carnival state that never returns to an official order, the lack of meaning and emptiness at its core soon becomes horrific. As Stephen Hutchings writes, "if incompatibilities are reduced to zero, cultural mixing results in an entropic absence of the differences which make meaning-generation possible. The novel's last ekphrastic scenes depicting Tatarsky in adverts for Coke, Head and Shoulders, and Tuborg indicate a collapse of significant difference into universal sameness" (181). Universal sameness and utter lack of meaning quickly turn the carnival into its dark twin, the abject, which famously resides in the realm where meaning and distinctions have completely collapsed - or never existed. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva defines the abject as something akin to absolute otherness, or "the jettisoned object" (2). The abject is neither subject nor object, but that impossible and unthinkable ambiguity that resides outside of any and all systems of meaning, in "the place where meaning collapses" (ibid). She writes, the abject is "a 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, or a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me"

(ibid). In Pelevin's novel, the emptiness that resides at the core of culture jettisons the post-Soviet world into the realm of the abject. The opening scenes present a world saturated by a sinister ambiguity and a dark mood provoked by the fact that everything once life-affirming and positive has been rendered meaningless refuse:

It was a very strange world. Externally it had not changed too much, except perhaps that there were more paupers on the streets, but everything in his surroundings – the houses, the trees, the benches on the streets – had somehow suddenly grown old and decrepit. It wasn't possible to say that the essential nature of the world had changed, either, because now it no longer had any essential nature. A frighteningly vague uncertainty dominated everything. (6)<sup>79</sup>

In the above description, the notion of emptiness is symbiotically connected to an abject aura: a “frighteningly vague uncertainty” dominates everything, the essential nature of which is non-existent. This symbiotic relationship between emptiness and the abject is reiterated in a later passage that describes how the Soviet realm, which no longer exists, has been replaced by a putrid uncertainty: “Lenin's statues were gradually carted out of town on military trucks [...], but his presence was merely replaced by a frightening murky grayness in which the Soviet soul simply continued rotting until it collapsed inwards on itself” (19).<sup>80</sup> The abject that accompanies the post-Soviet non-condition of culture continually threatens to annihilate those characters, including Tatarsky, who recognize it. As Kristeva explains that the abject is “what [is]

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<sup>79</sup> «Этот мир был очень странным. Внешне он изменился мало – разве что на улицах стало больше нищих, а все вокруг – дома, деревья, скамейки на улицах – вдруг как-то сразу постарело и опустилось. Сказать, что мир стал иным по своей сущности, тоже было нельзя, потому что никакой сущности у него теперь не было. Во всем царил страшноватая неопределенность» (18).

<sup>80</sup> «Его статуи увозили за город на военных грузовиках [...], но на смену приходила только серая страшноватость, в которой душа советского типа быстро догнивала и проваливалась внутрь самой себя» (36).

permanently thrust aside in order to live” (3), so Pelevin’s novel illustrates how awareness of the meaninglessness and emptiness of the world must be repeatedly kept at bay, oftentimes through drugs and self-inflicted pain. Suffering and hallucinations become methods for constructing at least the appearance of borders (and therefore, the appearance of a self) in a borderless, abject, and empty world in which the death of the self has transpired.

As demonstrated, the emptiness that characterizes culture in Pelevin’s novel is intimately bound up with the conditions of carnival and the abject. A certain paradox emerges when we consider the role both carnival and the abject play in the creation of meaning (often in the form of art and literature) out of chaos, together with the death of literature and meaning that Pelevin’s novel suggests. Many critics have interpreted the novel as a parable for the death of the intelligentsia, and the end of the sacred literary word, in post-Soviet culture. These readings point to still another form of emptiness suggested by the novel: the reduction of literature to zero as depicted in and embodied by the novel itself. Such interpretations focus on the trajectory taken by Tatarsky in the novel – he begins as an idealistic student who aspires to be a great poet, and ends as a cynic who writes and stars in advertisements. This suggests that the intelligentsia – traditionally the main producer and consumer of literature – has also been reduced to a meaningless zero. Lyudmila Parts, for instance, reads the novel as an allegory for the transformation of the concept of the intelligentsia in the post-Soviet period, and demonstrates how this transformation is embodied in Tatarsky: “[Pelevin] presents the story of the conversion of an *intelligent* into a copywriter (*конупаїмер*). In this story, the degradation of the word accompanies and precipitates the degradation of its carrier, the intelligentsia” (441). In Parts’ view, the novel tells the story of the death of Russia’s literary class and the accompanying demythologizing of the intelligentsia, which is brought about by the destruction of language’s

sacredness. When we recall that Tatarsky's background shares many similarities with Pelevin's own personal history, we can add an additional dimension to Parts' claim: Tatarsky's story also represents Pelevin's own implied status as a member of the degraded intelligentsia who no longer writes literature.<sup>81</sup> Pelevin therefore reduces himself to zero – a signifier of nothing – as well.

To be sure, this destruction and confusion of language is ubiquitous throughout the novel, and is especially represented by the constant invasion of English into the Russian logos. The novel's Russian title exemplifies this disappearance of the Russian logos by its incorporation of the English word "Generation" with the Russian letter "II", and most of Tatarsky's advertisements – which represent the form that literature has taken in post-Soviet culture – are composed of both English and Russian words, and oftentimes depend upon an understanding of the puns produced by the presence of the foreign words. As such, much of the meaning generated by the advertisements is literally untranslatable to those who rely solely upon the once sacred Russian logos. This confusion of languages is also present in the mythological subtext of the novel, which evokes the biblical Tower of Babel; as in the archetypal tale, post-Soviet Russian logos has undergone a linguistic fall from grace, and meaning is now doubly difficult to convey, if not an impossible endeavor as meaning no longer exists. It follows that one has to become a cross-dresser of languages, a kind of linguistic jester, if one wants any access to meaning; indeed, Bakhtin celebrates this very kind of polyphony and haphazard play of signifiers as that which produce an infinite range of new meaning. However, Pelevin's novel demonstrates that even those such as Tatarsky that succeed in becoming linguistic jesters derive a meaning that is

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<sup>81</sup> Like his hero, Pelevin was born in the sixties, studied briefly at the Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow, and worked as an advertising copywriter. They also both share an affinity for the writings of Boris Pasternak. See also Sofya Khagi's "From Homo Sovieticus to Homo Zapiens" (570-571). She points out many biographical and stylistic similarities between Tatarsky and Pelevin, and makes a case for the novel as an intensely self-referential text.

meaningless – all boils down to a price tag. In a move that turns the end-result of Bakhtin’s carnival on its head, Pelevin illustrates that even carnivalesque language produces a lack of meaning. As such, both these linguist jesters and those who cling to the spectral scepter of a pure Russian logos appear doomed to a meaningless world.

This confusion of languages that forms the punch line of these new post-Soviet advertisements, coupled with the replacement of literature by the advertisements themselves, signifies that literature has reached a zero-point in Pelevin’s novel. As Parts writes, “Before the fall of the Soviet Union, literature guaranteed a sure connection to eternity; it endowed the life of the Russian intelligentsia with meaning. By contrast, during the 1990s literature no longer provided a connection to anything but a publisher’s profit or loss” (444). Further evidence of the disappearance of literature in post-Soviet culture is the diminishing use of literary and high-culture references in Tatarsky’s later advertisements: whereas in the beginning of the novel he often gathers references from Russian literature to advertise the product in question, toward the end of the novel he largely disapproves of such a procedure. For instance, in one advert he replaces Pushkin (the father of Russian Logos) with “New Russians,” and coaches an inexperienced writer, ““It’s time to have done with literary history and think about real clientele”” (160).<sup>82</sup> Tatarsky’s two advertisements for The Gap also display the diminishing relevance of Russian literature; whereas the first advertisement (discussed earlier) utilizes an image of Anton Chekhov with his legs splayed, the second advertisement features a New Russian and a former Afghan soldier. The New Russian is seen shopping in the store, while the Afghan throws stones at the shop’s window. The earlier advertisement’s emphasis on literary culture is transformed in the second ad into a focus on the economic gap between the rich and the poor. Literary culture is no longer a selling point.

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<sup>82</sup> «Пора завязывать с литературоведением и думать о реальном клиенте» (231).

Furthermore, the form of *Generation "P"* evokes the process of watching television, and thereby suggests that Pelevin's novel itself is not literature. Hutchings points out that the main narrative thread is repeatedly interposed by proposals for advertisements that Tatarsky is writing, and therefore "resembles a televisual anti-novel," functioning much in the same way as a television show that is constantly interrupted by commercial breaks; as such, the novel "enacts the end of literature" (177). The cover for the novel's first edition (published by Vagrius) also reiterates the notion that Pelevin is not writing literature, but instead selling a brand. Foregrounding Che Guevara wearing a beret that bears the Nike logo, with a background composed of tiled Coke logos to his right versus tiled Pepsi logos on his left (together comprising a commercialized yin-yang), the cover image suggests that the novel is "a visually packaged commercial product, rather than a product of the spirit" (Hutchings, *ibid*). Especially the yin-yang comprised of Coke and Pepsi indicates that the opposing forces that give rise to the natural and spiritual worlds are the ebb and flow of consumerism. Coke and Pepsi, of course, figure in the novel as metonyms for western capitalism and Soviet communism respectively, with the former taking the place of the latter in the course of the novel. Such a shift from Pepsi to Coke, however, essentially amounts to no shift at all – merely the replacement of one brown liquid for another; likewise, the shift from Sovietism to capitalism is figured in the novel as an exchange of one meaningless ideological system for another.

The above edition of *Generation "P"* was not the only edition of the novel that was published by Vagrius during the year the novel was released. Khagi argues that, "to appeal to the widest target group, both 'high cultural' and 'pulp' editions of the novel were issued" (571). In effect, Pelevin adopts Tatarsky's theory of "positioning" in order to market his novel: goods must be "positioned" in such a way as to appeal to their target group. The above edition

represents the “mass market” positioning, while the “high cultural” edition is much more modest, with Vagrius’ typical black and white cover, and an image of Bruegel’s *Tower of Babel*. Likewise, when the first English edition of the novel was released in 1999, it was published as *Babylon* in the UK, and as *Homo Zapiens* in the USA; these different titles reflect how the novel has been positioned according to the perceived tastes of its given consumer. Ultimately, the commercial packaging of the novel, coupled with the Russian-logos-to-Western-advertising narrative, put forward the notion that literature itself has witnessed its end point, and has, like post-Soviet culture, become empty.

This idea that *Generation “P”* is not a novel at all, but rather an anti-novel that embodies in form and content emptied literature – the logos brought to zero, logos without meaning – is complicated and even brought into a paradox when we consider the carnival and abject aesthetics that the novel employs. For both carnival and abjection are semiotic systems of liminality that produce the transcendental signified. One of the most important ideas in Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* concerns the corporeal word itself, and specifically, how it is born out of carnivalization and the grotesque body. The carnival uncrowns what was once a highly sacred act of naming and creating language, and brings the word down to the lower, material, bodily level in order to refresh it anew and manifest a richness of novel meanings. During carnival, the word becomes the offspring of the high and the low; it is at once of the body and of the mind, the oxymoronic fleshy idea, and, significantly, re-links the proverbial golden chain between the signified (sacred) and the signifier (profane). As such, carnival rejuvenates the word, and by proxy the world, with meaning. Likewise, the abject, as Kristeva argues, is closely (and even, perhaps, *necessarily*) tied to the production of art and religion. She writes,

The various means of purifying the abject – the various catharses – make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion. Seen from that standpoint, the artistic experience, which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies, appears as the essential component of religiosity. (17)

Kristeva makes the case that the best modern literature investigates the abject, the place where boundaries begin to break down, where we are brought face to face with an archaic and tenuous space that resides before linguistic, social, or psychological binaries such as self/other or subject/object. The transcendental project, for Kristeva, is really our effort to smooth over the fractures of meaning associated with the abject: “On close inspection, all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its sociohistorical conditions might be, on the fragile border where identities do not exist or only barely so – double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject” (207). The abject conditions and even necessitates the aesthetic or religious project that creates the transcendental signified. For both Bakhtin and Kristeva, then, the apocalyptic moment generates a creative impulse that produces meaning, which makes Pelevin’s employment of these systems to depict the post-Soviet non-condition of culture, and the accompanying death of literature, all the more troubling: *Generation “P”* implies that carnival and abjection, which once produced meaning out of the apocalyptic moment, have lost their power to do so in the postmodern condition. Or, that the meaning that *is* produced – consumerism – is empty, no longer related to anything beyond the image.

This is a further way in which Pelevin dismantles his novel as novel, and how he denies his novel’s literary art: he removes the meaning-making power and ability to produce ideals from

aesthetic and theoretical systems (such as carnival and abjection) that have been studied and celebrated – even revered – for their ability to generate meaning in an otherwise chaotic world. In all, *Generation “P”* performs in its narrative and published forms as “voided writing”: it does so by marketing itself like a consumer product (which the text establishes as inherently empty), by reading as a television show interrupted by commercials (which functions to deny the novel’s status as literary art), by dismantling aesthetic systems that traditionally produced meaning, and by featuring a protagonist whose history reflects Pelevin’s, thus implying that Tatarsky’s journey from a meaningful to a meaningless logos is also the author’s. The content of the novel figures as “writing about the void”: the story of Tatarsky in post-Soviet Russia demonstrates how art has reached its zero-point (literature has been replaced by advertisements; “monetaristic minimalism”), how the human subject no longer exists (*Homo sapiens* have become *Homo zapiens*), and how the current cultural condition is a “non-condition” (the *oramus* is the figuration of an all-consuming cultural void). While we might be tempted to read the novel as a dystopian critique of consumer culture,<sup>83</sup> the novel’s own consumerist form empties it both of its ability to satirize and of literature’s traditional capacity to champion ideals that society strives to realize. *Generation “P”* ultimately paints a pessimistic portrait of the post-Soviet world and the void, and echoes many well-known anxieties concerning the postmodern condition – in a world where everything is empty, how can one avoid nihilism? *Generation “P”* diagnoses the state, but offers no remedy for this anxiety.

### III. Bifurcated Realities and the Sacred, Productive Void: *Chapaev and Voyd* and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*

The deconstruction of binary oppositions that is ubiquitous in *Generation “P”*, and that is at once the symptom and the cause of an empty culture, is found throughout many of Pelevin’s

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<sup>83</sup> See, for example Irina Rodnyanskaya’s «Этот мир придуман не нами» (1999), one of the earliest critical pieces that analyzes the dystopian elements in *Generation “P”*.

other works – often taking the form of opposing realities that co-exist. By combining postmodern aesthetics with various mystical, religious, and literary philosophies along with Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet ideologies, Pelevin create novelistic worlds that contain parallel yet contrasting realities. By setting up these coexistences that are inherently at odds with one another, reminiscent of Borgesian “gardens of forking paths,”<sup>84</sup> Pelevin’s writings explore the nature of reality itself, always asking the question *what is ‘is’?* His answer, as it is in *Generation “P”*, is always nothingness; however this ontological void is not always accompanied by such pessimism as is found in *Generation “P”*. Intimately related to these multiple realities is the paradoxical notion that the void is at the center of them all, and that nothingness is the essence of each reality or being – that is, the void is the creative force, the necessary element for anything to exist. It is in this way that Pelevin’s preoccupation with the void as a cultural condition takes on a positive aspect and creative power, and even becomes a means to transcend the nihilistic nothingness that is portrayed in *Generation “P”*. Emptiness becomes the only true state of being, the force that allows for existence, and is therefore a vessel of the sacred; it becomes the transcendental signified.

Bifurcated realities that are generated by a void is a theme that is central to Pelevin’s *Chapaev and Voyd*, which is a literal translation of the novel’s original Russian title, *Чапаяв и Пычмома*.<sup>85</sup> Like *Generation “P”*, the novel has been translated into English under two different titles: *The Clay Machine Gun* (UK, 1998) and *Buddha’s Little Finger* (New York, 1999). The main character of the novel is also variously known as Peter Null in the UK edition, and Pyotr

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<sup>84</sup> Pelevin alludes to Borges’ famous garden in the preface to *Chapaev and Voyd*, which is written by the fictional Urgan Jambon Tulku VII. Here, the fictional editor suggests an alternative title of the text, “The Garden of the Divergent Petkas” («Сад расходящихся Петек»), which is in reference to the main character who exists in at least two separate realities. A complete comparative analysis of Pelevin and Borges lies outside the scope of the present project.

<sup>85</sup> I use the American edition for English translations of the text.

Voyd in the US edition. These divergent translations embody one of the main philosophies of the novel: alternative realities that simultaneously co-exist in the same single entity. As Voyd/Null is the central character upon which these narratives are built, this indicates that these divergent narratives are also generated by the void. Moreover, when we place the US and UK translations side-by-side, they together form a visual and material representation of the novel's most significant symbol: the clay machine gun (UK), which is also Buddha's little finger (US); likewise, Pyotr Voyd is Peter Null. At the core of both Voyd/Null, and the clay machine gun/Buddha's little finger, is the void of existence. As we discover in the course of the novel, when one shoots/points the gun/finger at something, its true nature is revealed as nothingness; that is, it disappears.

Thus, the image of the gun/finger represents the bifurcated realities that inhabit Pelevin's novelistic world, and moreover symbolizes the emptiness that is this world's essence: when one holds a mirror up to the gun/finger, the mirror reveals the true nature of the gun/finger by causing it to disappear. These realities only seemingly exist, they are only the appearance of realities, and beneath them there is literally nothing. As Petka puts it, existence is "a golden label on an empty bottle ... A shop where everything is displayed in a magnificently arranged window-setting, but that tiny, tender, narrow little room behind it [...] Yes, that room is empty [void]" (287).<sup>86</sup> His familial name, Voyd (Пыцтора), draws Petka's statements full circle – there is a void (писто) behind all existence, and there is Voyd (Пыцтора). Petka's statement at once affirms and erases his own being, and establishes him simultaneously *as both the creator and the created of his world, as both the signified and the signifier*, thereby exhibiting Pelevin's notions of a transcendental void generating the world, and the world, in turn, regenerating the very void that

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<sup>86</sup> «[...] золотая этикетка на пустой бутылке ... Магазин, где все выставлено на великолепно убранной витрине, а в скрытом за ней крохотном, нежном, узком-узком зале [...] Да, в этом зале – пусто» (344).

generates it. The two English translations of the novel push the idea of bifurcated realities beyond the narrative confines of the protagonist's personal tale and into the world of Pelevin's readers: while readers in the UK read about Null in *The Clay Machine Gun*, readers in the US read the story of Voyd in *Buddha's Little Finger* – bifurcated narratives that amount to the same zero. These bifurcated realities conditioned by the void demonstrate that the void can be transformed into any form: either a gun or a finger, for example, or a Null or a Voyd, or *The Clay Machine Gun* or *Buddha's Little Finger*.

Within the narrative itself, the protagonist exists in at least two main realities at once: as the now-legendary poet-turned-Bolshevik Petka, who was the sidekick of the historical Bolshevik commander, Vasily Chapaev (1887-1919), during the Civil War; and as a patient in a post-Soviet Russian madhouse. Additionally, assisted by drug-fueled hypnosis, Petka experiences the alternative existences and inner lives of the other patients in his ward. Oftentimes, the leap from Petka's consciousness to that of another patient's is made without warning or explanation, just as Petka's switching back-and-forth between his 1919 and 1991 existences is as unstructured as falling asleep and waking up. As such, the distinctions between reality and dreams, and between the self and the other, dissolve; reality takes on dreamlike contours, and the self shades into the other. On the one hand, Pelevin presents this waking-sleep existence as the direct result of the disappearance of the Soviet Union. Indeed, the doctor Timur Timurovich explains Petka's madness as the collapse of his human psyche, caused by the corresponding collapse of the Soviet Union – “When established connections in the real world collapse, the same thing happens in the human psyche” (33).<sup>87</sup> On the other hand, this explanation becomes too pat within the course of the novel, as Pelevin reveals how the

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<sup>87</sup> «И когда в реальном мире рушатся какие-нибудь устоявшиеся связи, то же самое происходит и в психике» (46).

distinctions between fantasy and reality have always been chimeras; the fall of the Soviet Union merely draws attention to reality as a bankrupt concept, itself a void. Petka's two existences each take place during periods of extreme change within Russia: just after the Russian Revolution, which witnessed the replacement of tsarism with communism; and just after the fall of the Soviet Union, which occasioned the end of communism and the rise of capitalism. The fall of the Soviet Union, then, is not an anomalous historical event in which "established connections to the real world" collapsed; it is one of at least two within the narrative of the novel, and moreover becomes just one of countless expressions of reality's collapse – of reality revealed to be empty – throughout the novel's entire course. Pelevin purposely brings the loss of reality out of a specifically post-Soviet context in order to demonstrate how all reality has always been a void.

These notions of bifurcated realities and empty existence are embodied most strikingly in Petka. Petka's alleged madness – which, according to his doctor, causes him to produce alternative existences – is itself described as a void. As another patient explains to him, "Your surname is Voyd [...] and your madness is caused by your denying the existence of your own personality and replacing it with another, totally invented one" (89).<sup>88</sup> It is significant that Petka cannot remember his own surname, and is told by the other patients that it is "Voyd." This inability to remember his family name that is itself an expression of blankness ("Voyd," of course, sounds like "void"; this pun is present in the original Russian) points to an essential blankness present in Petka's own being, which the novel increasingly reveals to be the only true existence. Petka's psychosis, then, falls in the tradition of countless literary madmen and fools whose perceived insanity is actually wisdom, and whose madness is an expression of the truth. Petka's particular brand of insanity is characterized as a void – as an expression of nothingness –

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<sup>88</sup> «Ваша фамилия – Пустота [...] И ваше помешательство связано именно с тем, что вы отрицаете существование своей личности, заменив ее совершенно другой, выдуманной от начала до конца» (113).

and its most significant literary antecedent is the fool of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, who famously tells his master, "Now thou art an O without a figure. I am better / than thou art now: I am a fool, thou art nothing" (I.iv.715-716). Lear's madness is the manifestation of his bloated, all-powerful identity reduced to nothing, as the fool repeatedly explains to his king. Likewise, Petka's madness is the expression of the void (ничто), which also stands for his identity as his family name, Voyd (Ильцова), indicates. The difference between Lear and Petka, however, lies in the temporality of their respective insanities. Whereas Lear's madness is a new result of the recent change of his status from a king complete with the most significant and powerful of earthy identities, to a bare "unaccommodated man" whose identity is no more significant or meaningful than an animal's (III.iv.1901), Petka's madness – or zero state of identity – has always been. Pelevin's utilization of the archetype of the "wise fool" who realizes identity and existence are nothing – these Os without figures – demonstrates how the "wise fool" is not only a character who speaks the truth during these tragedies that may befall human existence, but is also a character who speaks the truth of human existence period. Pelevin therefore removes tragedy from the equation of madness, and turns insanity into a positive state of enlightenment.

The novel's other main character, Chapaev, is also a signifier of the void and bifurcated realities. Vasily Chapaev – the real-life Red Army commander-turned-immortalized-hero of Soviet propaganda – appears in Pelevin's novel as an educated philosopher who pontificates endlessly upon emptiness and Buddhism. In Dmitrii Furmanov's now-legendary account of Chapaev, and in the notorious film based on Furmanov's book, Chapaev is depicted as an uneducated yet courageous peasant who is brought into enlightenment by his commissar, Klychkov (who plays Furmonov's role in the real-life events), a representative of the Party.<sup>89</sup> In

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<sup>89</sup> See, for example, Dmitrii Furmanov's novel *Chapaev* (1923), and the famous Vasilyev brothers film of the same name (1934). For an excellent discussion of the Chapaev myth in relation to Soviet literature,

*Chapaev and Voyd*, Pelevin has, in effect, reversed the situation: Chapaev now educates his commissar Petka. Moreover, he endlessly sermonizes not on Socialist ideology but on emptiness. By rewriting Chapaev as a philosopher of emptiness instead of a mouthpiece for Socialist ideology, Pelevin equates the two, suggesting that Socialist ideology is empty as well. Some critics, following the reasoning of Petka's doctor Timur Timurovich, explain the novel as the story of Petka Voyd, *Homo Sovieticus*, who finds himself living in a post-Soviet void once the Soviet Union has ceased to exist;<sup>90</sup> however, this is not the full story, as Chapaev's place in the novel indicates. By discussing emptiness instead of Party ideology, this rewritten version of Chapaev demonstrates that the Soviet Union and *Homo Sovieticus* were incarnations of the void as well.

This is why Pelevin repeatedly associates madness and emptiness with Eastern concepts of enlightenment throughout *Chapaev and Voyd*, and presents Petka's insanity and bifurcated existences not as a tragedy, but simply as existence: this condition of emptiness transcends the specific experience of post-Soviet Russia, and becomes, on a universal level, the expression of enlightenment and the means to freedom. When confined to post-Soviet experience, existential emptiness is the cause of insanity, as demonstrated by Petka's living in a madhouse, or it is the cause of nihilism, as witnessed in the narrative of *Generation "P"*. When removed from a specific context, however, emptiness allows for freewill and control over one's existence. We see both sides of this – an expression of insanity in a specific context, versus an expression of creation from a universal standpoint – many times throughout the novel. For instance, the notes in Petka's patient file establish him as a madman who spouts nonsense in the post-Soviet realm,

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see Katerina Clark's *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (2000, 82-89); in relation to Soviet film and culture, see Peter Kenez's *Cinema and Soviet Society: From the Revolution to the Death of Stalin* (2001, 155-161).

<sup>90</sup> See, for example, Mørch's "Reality as Myth" (2005).

but also as a meaning-maker – as an enlightened seer – if we read Petka outside of a post-Soviet context:

The patient says there is no one capable of thinking “on his wavelength.” Believes he can see and feel things unattainable to “laymen.” For instance, in the folds of a curtain or tablecloth, the patterns of wallpaper etc. he distinguishes lines, shapes and forms which express “*the beauty of life*.” According to his words, this is his “*golden joy*,” that is, the reason for which he daily repeats the “involuntary heroism of existence.” (104)<sup>91</sup>

Petka’s madness, (again, a symptom of his essential relationship to the void), generates “the beauty of life,” his “golden joy”; in effect, something quite different from the meaningless and inescapable price tags produced by the void in *Generation “P”*. His access to the void brings the highest aesthetic meaning into his world – that is, beauty. As such, Petka’s madness is highly reminiscent of “referential mania,” which, as I discuss extensively in “Chapter Three” on Nabokov, is characterized by a vision of patterns and phenomena that are, to the rational and sane eye, not there. For Nabokov, referential mania is the system artists and madmen employ to make meaning in a world where meaning otherwise does not exist; the zero at the core of referential mania allows for the creation of meaning, and for the possibility of freewill. Likewise, Petka sees and feels things that are, to the layperson’s eye, not there; these patterns that he perceives, however, bring beauty and meaning to his existence. From the perspective of Timur Timurovich, who represents rationality in the post-Soviet condition, Petka’s vision establishes him as a madman; after all, Petka believes he is living in a Soviet world, which is not possible in Timur Timurovich’s post-Soviet existence. But from Petka’s standpoint – and also, I would

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<sup>91</sup> «По словам больного, никто не в силах мыслить с ним 'в резонанс.' Полагает, что способен видеть у чувствовать недоступное 'мирянам.' Например, в складках шторы или скатерти, в рисунке обоев и т.д. различает линии, узоры и формы, дающие 'красоту жизни.' Это, по его словам является его 'золотой удачей,' то есть тем, для чего он ежедневно повторяет 'подневольный подвиг существования.'» (130)

argue, the novel's philosophical perspective – his vision brings agency, meaning, and beauty into his life. Petka, and by proxy *Chapaev and Voyd*, is able to do what literature in *Generation "P"* is no longer capable of: create aesthetic beauty and value.

This notion of the creativity and power of emptiness is reiterated in the Buddhist ideas that are explored throughout the novel; these ideas are not confined to the conversations between Petka and Chapaev, but also appear in many of the other patients' visions or alternative existences. This serves to universalize these concepts of enlightenment and the void. For instance, the patient Serdyuk, during a hypnotic trance, has a conversation with a Japanese businessman who tells him many times and through many different metaphors that God is a Void. ““In the depths of the Russian soul lies the same gaping void we find deep in the soul of Japan. And from this very void the world comes into being, constantly, with every second”” (168-9).<sup>92</sup> Again, the void is the creative, god-like, productive force that generates all being.

The metaphor of the onion is even employed in *Chapaev and Voyd* to represent the empty core of existence, not unlike how Alexander Genis, as discussed earlier, utilizes the metaphor of the onion to describe the post-Soviet condition. Significantly, Genis equates the “cosmic zero” at the onion's core “around which being generates” with Taoist notions of “creative emptiness” (411, 412): “The ‘onion paradigm’ has much in common with the motifs of [Lao-tse's] *Tao-te Ching*,” he writes, and goes on to explain how “in the ‘onion paradigm’ chaos is the seed of the world, the ‘creative nothingness’ of [Ilya] Prigogine, from which cosmos is born” (412). In *Chapaev and Voyd*, onions replace potatoes in one of the most famous episodes from the Chapaev mythology: the scene wherein Chapaev uses potatoes to map out his military strategy against the White Army. That onions instead of potatoes are used in this mapping is a detail

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<sup>92</sup> «В глубине российской души зияет та же пустота, что и в глубине японской. И именно из этой пустоты и возникает мир, возникает каждую секунду» (205).

Petka draws attention to many times throughout the novel; moreover, he rewrites the military map of the legend into a map of consciousness:

“[...] it was a metaphorical map of consciousness, not a plan of military positions at all. And they were not potatoes, but onions.”

“Onions?”

“Yes, onions. Although for a number of highly personal reasons I would have given a great deal for them to have been potatoes instead” (313).<sup>93</sup>

These onions placed on Chapaev’s so-called “map of consciousness” figure much like the “cored onion” Genis describes; Chapaev’s onion, which stands for Petka, has many layers surrounding a void. It is this void – or Voyd – which represents Petka’s consciousness, and from which the various layers of existence come to be. Genis’ ruminations on the “cored onion” well describe the workings of emptiness in Pelevin’s novel: “In the ‘onion paradigm,’ art is a form of magic. It is a mechanism for the production of reality. We live in the world invented by it” (418). In *Chapaev and Voyd*, Petka’s madness/enlightenment – bifurcated realities produced by the void (which is his consciousness, his “I”, his Voyd) – is his art. It is through this art that he not only creates his worlds, but more importantly grants them meaning and beauty. To realize the empty nature of all existence and therefore achieve enlightenment grants one power over his realities. The void, in other words, is the sacred, productive space in *Chapaev and Voyd*.

In *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, Pelevin revisits the theme of bifurcated realities and the void as truth, but he more acutely explores how realization of these notions can become a source of creativity and power over one’s existence. Whereas in *Chapaev and Voyd*, Pelevin’s

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<sup>93</sup> «[...] это была метафорическая карта сознания, а вовсе не план расположения войск. И не картошка там была, а лук.

– Лук?

– Да, лук. Хотя по ряду глубоко личных обстоятельств я дорого бы дал за то, чтобы там была картошка» (373).

oxymoronic enlightened/insane hero is largely unaware of *why* he is simultaneously living in two separate realities, and for the most part must be taught the nature and power of the void, in *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* Pelevin's heroine is fully aware of the character and power of emptiness, and uses this knowledge to control the world around her. While one could argue that Petka only appears to be mad in the eyes of the modern world (as represented by Timur Timurovich), the fact remains that he is by-and-large powerless in both of his existences, and cannot even decide which existence he wants to occupy (at least, not until the novel's finale); his enlightened condition is therefore marked as an unwilling or unaware madness. In contrast, A Hu-Li, the werefox heroine of *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, is very much aware of the empty nature of the world, and her status as a shape-shifting were-creature symbolizes her corporeal and physiological embodiment of this enlightenment. As Pelevin's novels suggest, if the nature of existence is emptiness, and if the void is the only true and stable reality, it follows that any number of realities, even mutually-contradicting realities, can exist simultaneously. The figure of a were-creature personifies Pelevin's philosophy: she can adopt different shapes or "realities," because she truly, *viscerally* understands that she has no true stable nature – or that her stable nature is nothing itself.

This shift from *Chapaev and Voyd* to *The Sacred book of the Werewolf* exhibits the evolution of Pelevin's exploration of the productive void and its enabling of bifurcated realities. Following the trajectory of Pelevin's fiction, we find that most of his stories and novels take place in different varieties of bifurcated existences, and that his more recent fiction increasingly portrays this forked nature in hybrid creatures: that is, the heroes of his later novels more and more include were-creatures and vampires (beings who corporeally embody a bifurcated nature), whereas the heroes of his earlier novels simultaneously exist in two or more realms, but are not

themselves hybrid beings. In other words, the trajectory of Pelevin's fiction begins with bifurcated realms and increasingly narrows to bifurcated, hybrid beings. The emergence of these hybrid beings that embody Pelevin's notions of bifurcated realities is accompanied by his heroes' increasing agency and control over their worlds. Thus, the heroes of Pelevin's earliest novels – Omon of *Omon Ra* (1991), the cast of insects/humans in *The Life of Insects* (1993), Petka of *Chapaev and Voyd* – each exist simultaneously in opposing realities: Omon believes he has performed a mission on the moon, only to discover that it took place in an abandoned subway tunnel; the characters in *The Life of Insects* simultaneously live both as humans and as insects; and Petka, of course, exists both in 1919 Soviet Russia and 1991 Post-Soviet Russia. None of these early characters, however, have any consistent control over which existence they occupy. In contrast, Pelevin's more recent hybrid characters *do* have control over their worlds: this is especially apparent in *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, and *Empire V* (2006), and *t* (2009).

A Hu-Li, Pelevin's heroine of *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, is a two-thousand-year-old were-fox from ancient China who appears as a fourteen-year-old nymphet in contemporary Russia. This use of the descriptor "nymphet" is not arbitrary here, as A Hu-Li not only describes herself as a modern-day Lolita, but takes "Lolita's story very personally and very seriously" (51).<sup>94</sup> Of course, "Lolita" is how Humbert Humbert *perceives* the child Dolores Haze; "Lolita" is a vision that affects real control and power over him, that shapes the way he understands and lives in his world. In a similar manner, A Hu-Li controls the perception of others in order to control the world around her: "We, the foxes, use *transformation of perception*. We influence our clients' perception and make them see what we want them to see. The illusion we induce

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<sup>94</sup> «Я принимала историю Лолиты очень лично и всерьез» (62).

becomes absolutely real for them” (227).<sup>95</sup> She becomes, in effect, her clients’ “Lolitas”: whatever fantasy they desire, and which can therefore wield power over them. In this way, Pelevin has rewritten the story of *Lolita* to give his nymphet heroine – the Dolores Haze/Lolita figure – agency over her world. This is in contrast to Nabokov’s original, wherein Dolores Haze is, in the first instance, unwittingly pulled into Humbert’s fantasy world, and in the second instance, unwillingly forced to play a part in Humbert’s illusion. The important lesson that A Hu-Li takes from Nabokov is the power of perception – after all, Humbert becomes a slave to the fantasy, to his *vision*, of Lolita. She connects this notion to Buddhist philosophy that she studies throughout the centuries, and to Western philosophy as well: that “‘to exist’ really does mean ‘to be perceived’” (226).<sup>96</sup> Without perception, there is nothing; but because there is nothing, one can perceive anything – and by proxy, exist in any way: as A Hu-Li explains to her werewolf boyfriend, “‘nothing can become anything at all’” (310).<sup>97</sup> A Hu-Li mentally and bodily understands this, which is why she exists as a hybrid were-fox, and why she can control the perception/existences of the world around her.

The void is therefore figured as a productive and creative force in *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, even though A Hu-Li is fully aware of the consumerist and nihilistic emptiness that is ubiquitously present in her world, and that is so pessimistically depicted in *Generation “P”*. In fact, as I will demonstrate, this destructive and meaningless emptiness is embodied in the other main were-creature of the novel, the werewolf Alexander. A Hu-Li therefore lives in a culture that is still entirely empty and fueled by meaningless price tags; however, she directly confronts

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<sup>95</sup> «Мы, лисы, используем *трансформацию восприятия*. Мы воздействуем на восприятие клиентов, заставляя их видеть то, что нам хочется. Наведенный нами морок становится для них абсолютно реален» (261).

<sup>96</sup> «[...] ‘существовать’ действительно означает ‘восприниматься’» (260).

<sup>97</sup> « – Потому что это ничего может стать чем угодно» (355).

the empty nature of the world, and manipulates it to her own ends. In doing so, she demonstrates how the void can be the ultimate generative source, can transcend the nihilistic emptiness left in the wake of delegitimated grand narratives, and can refashion the truth (that is, the void) to be anything she wishes.

This notion that A Hu-Li becomes her clients' "Lolitas" is also at play in A Hu-Li's own romance ("tailechery") with the werewolf Alexander, a FSB (former KGB) officer who is a central figure in Russia's oil exploits. Alexander nicknames A Hu-Li "Ada" – a reference to Nabokov's eponymous heroine who has an incestuous, lifelong love affair with her half-brother, and also to the Russian word for "Hell." In turn, A Hu-Li gives Alexander the pet name "Shurik," which is a direct reference to the stray dog "Sharik" from Mikhail Bulgakov's *Heart of a Dog* (1925). This nickname is highly appropriate for many reasons. First of all, Mikhlich, who works for Alexander, speaks with A Hu-Li about Alexander's predecessors, one of which was Comrade Sharikov, "The one Bulgakov wrote about in *A Dog's Heart*," A Hu Li rightly guesses (324).<sup>98</sup> In Bulgakov's novella, Sharik undergoes surgery to take on human form, and thereby physically represents the idea of the "New Soviet Man." Secondly, the parallels between Pelevin's Shurik and Bulgakov's Sharik are not confined to their shape-shifting from canine to man; they are also united in their belief that they represent the pinnacle of species, and herald a coming utopia. Alexander claims that he is the incarnation of the "super werewolf," despite A Hu-Li's repeated attempts to explain that the "super werewolf" is a metaphor, a figuration of the

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<sup>98</sup> Bromfield's translation of *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* makes explicit what is only implied in the Russian: that Comrade Sharikov is the same Sharik depicted in Bulgakov's novella. Mikhlich explains to A Hu-Li that Alexander has been spending his time studying the past experience of his werewolf predecessors, including Comrade Sharikov; A Hu-Li draws the connection between Bulgakov's Sharik, but is cut off from overtly stating it:

- А после работы сидит в архиве. Изучает опыт.
- Чей опыт?
- Товарища Шарикова.
- А этого. Который зав подотделом очистки ... (371).

void that is everything. Alexander believes himself to be the only “super werewolf”; he misunderstands the notion by making it too literal, not unlike how the Soviet regime strove to make ideology reality. The romance between A Hu-Li and Alexander, then, demonstrates the theory that perception is the only form of existence. Both A Hu-Li and Alexander are given pet names that are derived from literary sources, which indicates that *fiction* creates them in the eyes of others. A Hu-Li’s pet name, “Ada,” reflects how Alexander perceives her: as a very young, intelligent, sharp-witted, incapacitating female. Likewise, Alexander’s nickname, “Shurik” mirrors how Ada reluctantly comes to perceive Alexander: as a “New Man,” central to his corrupted regime’s success, and to their destructive oil exploits. In fact, he lives up to his Bulgakovian predecessor’s example: annoyingly narcissistic, self-assured in his own greatness and righteousness, socially destructive and perverse, wholly worthy of satire. Ultimately, the fictions and perceptions they establish in regards to one another shape their perceived reality of the other. This is underscored by their real-life enactments of well-known fictional personas.

This theory of perception – its relationship to emptiness, and its role in creating countless realities – is discussed and explored in depth throughout Pelevin’s work, and appears to reach an apex in *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*. In his earlier novel *The Life of Insects*, Pelevin’s characters do not undergo metamorphoses à la Kafka: rather, transformation from insect to human and back again “is only in the eye of the beholder,” as the critic Mørch points out (61). Similarly, perception is an incredibly important theme in *Omon Ra*, which depicts the Soviet regime as constantly creating and projecting elaborate spectacles that are taken for reality; these elaborate performances of great Soviet achievements (such as their space program, and taking diplomats on extravagant bear hunts) mask the reality of a lack of Soviet progress and accomplishments. As Omon’s moon landing really happens in an abandoned subway station, so

foreign diplomats are only hunting Soviet men wearing bear suits. In *Omon Ra*, controlling perception becomes the key to creating and maintaining the Soviet reality.

In *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, Pelevin plucks perception from the banal practice of Soviet myth-making, and employs it to emancipate the human spirit from the nihilistic abyss. Transcendence of nihilistic nothingness requires a paradoxical embrace of the void, which grants a creative power to the act of perception, not unlike Nietzsche's notions of perspectivism and forgetting (see this study's "Introduction"). Whereas the werefox employs *transformation of perception* (she makes others see what she wants them to see), the werewolf uses *perception of transformation* – he creates illusions that he believes in so strongly that they become reality: “[Werewolves] create an illusion, not for others, but for themselves. And they believe in it so strongly that the illusion ceases to be an illusion” (228).<sup>99</sup> Both of these methods of reality creation via perception are dependent upon the void – or, the “super werewolf”: the nothing that is everything. In this schematic, nothingness becomes the highest state of being. To become the super werewolf – to look into oneself and find nothing – becomes a means of transcendence: transcendence from language, “the root from which infinite human stupidity grows” (314)<sup>100</sup>; transcendence from the world; and transcendence, in other words, from “shit creek” (265).<sup>101</sup> As A Hu-Li explains,

The super-werewolf becomes you, me, this bag of apples, this cup, this crate – everything that you look at in turn. [...] The super-werewolf can't be caught by the tail. Because it doesn't have a body. [...] It's simply a void that can be filled with anything. Nothing can

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<sup>99</sup> «Они создают иллюзию не для других, а для себя. И верят в нее до такой степени, что иллюзия перестает быть иллюзией» (262).

<sup>100</sup> «Это корень, из которого растет бесконечная человеческая глупость» (359).

<sup>101</sup> «Короче, именно из-за слов люди и оказались в полной жопе» (305).

stick to this void. Nothing can touch it or stain it, because you only have to take away what it's been filled with, and it will be the same as it was before. (310-311)<sup>102</sup>

In other words, the void provides the potential for an infinite number of existences (“you, me, this bag of apples, this cup, this crate”) to come into being through the act of perception (what “you look at in turn”). A Hu-Li connects the notion of perception with creation. Perception ceases to be the discovery of the world as there is only *nothing* to discover: “The super-werewolf can't be caught by the tail. Because it doesn't have a body.” Instead, perception is the creation of the world. The void or “super-werewolf” that comprises all of existence grants vision an active, *producing* power. This shift from discovery of meaning to the production of meaning mimics, of course, the shift from modern to postmodern notions regarding the nature of truth – that is, whether truth immanently, essentially exists as something to be discovered (the modern view), or, on the contrary, if truth is something that is always created, performed, seen: “whatever you look at in turn” becomes what exists (the postmodern view).

This sacred and productive void, the “super-werewolf,” is the means to transcend the nihilistic nothingness of the postmodern condition that many have lamented. The paradox at work requires that one view the potential tragedy of nothingness (e.g. the nonexistence of stable meaning as mourned in *Generation “P”*, or Petka's madness as perceived in a post-Soviet world) instead as the creative potentiality that nothingness affords. This requires that one takes control of her own perception, necessitates that one employs her own faculties for understanding as a tool that creates, and not merely discovers. As A Hu-Li writes about humankind, “The tailless monkey must therefore first grasp how he creates the world and in what way he imposes

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<sup>102</sup> «А сверхоборотень по очереди становится тобой, мной, этим пакетом яблок, этой чашкой, этим ящиком – всем, на что ты смотришь. [...] А сверхоборотня взять за хвост нельзя. Потому что у него нет тела. [...] Это просто пустота, которую можно заполнить чем угодно. К этой пустоте ничего не может прилипнуть. Ее ничего не может коснуться, потому что стоит убрать то, чем ее заполнили, и она снова станет такой как раньше» (355-356).

the illusion on himself” (332).<sup>103</sup> To really and wholly understand that the void is reality, and that perception therefore produces “reality,” is to become a shape-shifter like A Hu-Li. A Hu-Li’s understanding of this philosophy is so complete that it corporeally affects her own being: throughout the novel she controls the perceptions of those around her, until she decides, at the end, to disappear and thus “really” know herself. As reality is the void, true knowledge *is* nothing.

While A Hu-Li perceives the void as a creative force, she encounters a destructive void in the figure of the werewolf Alexander. So completely, so narcissistically does Alexander believe in the reality of his own perceptions that he reduces the entire world to his own being, and moreover considers himself to be the singular embodiment of the ultimate truth: the super werewolf. The destructive void embodied in Alexander is quite straightforwardly established when he becomes the hound Pizdets: that same five-legged dog from *Generation “P”* that represents the sleeping apocalypse, which always threatens to wake up and therefore unleash a nihilistic nothingness over the world. It is A Hu-Li who explains to Alexander who he is:

“I’ve remembered who you are.”

“And who am I?”

“I read somewhere about a dog like you with five legs. The Dog Pizdets. He sleeps up among the eternal snows, and when enemies descend on Russia in their hordes, he wakes up and ...”

“Treads on them with his leg?” [Alexander] asked.

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<sup>103</sup> «Поэтому бесхвостая обезьяна должна сначала разобраться, как она создает мир и чем наводит на себя морок» (380).

“No. He ... He kind of happens to them. Like shit happens, you know. And I think in the northern myths he’s called ‘Garm.’ Have you come across him? The Nordic project’s your area, after all.”

“No,” he said, “I haven’t. It’s interesting. Tell me more.”

“He’s a truly fearsome dog. The wolf Fenrir’s double. He’ll come into his own after Ragnarek. But in the meantime he guards the house of the dead.” (280)<sup>104</sup>

Alexander takes this information, along with the information A Hu-Li tells him about the super werewolf, and leaves for a few days in order to “happen to” a number of people – that is, he causes them to disappear. He also brings this information back to the FSB, and later asserts that no one else can become the super werewolf, subtly threatening A Hu-Li in doing so. He uses his *transformation of perception* enabled by the void to make others disappear, not unlike his KGB predecessors: “The country needs purging,”<sup>105</sup> he has his messenger Mikhailich tell A Hu-Li. And he ultimately uses his powers to tap into oil reserves in order to fuel Russia’s economy (think: oranus). In a scene that draws from a familiar Russian fairytale “Burenushka, the Little Red Cow,” Alexander draws oil from a cow’s skull. In the original fairytale, Burenushka figures as a surrogate mother to Princess Maria who is abused by her stepmother: the cow helps to feed and clothe the princess. In Pelevin’s version, however, all that remains of the nurturing cow is her skull, which is held together by metal plates and rods, thereby figuring as a kind of disintegrating

<sup>104</sup>

– Вспомнила, кто ты.

– И кто я?

– Я читала про такую собаку с пятью лапами. Пес Пиздец. Он спит среди снегов, а когда на Русь слетаются супостаты, просыпается и всем им наступает ... Точно. И еще вроде бы в северных мифах его называют «Гарм». Ты не слышал? Нордический проект – это твой профиль.

– Нет, – сказал он. – Не слышал. Интересно. Говори.

– Такой жуткий пес, двойник волка Фенрира. Ярко себя проявит во время Рагнарека. А пока сторожит дом мертвых. (322)

<sup>105</sup> «– Стране нужно очищение» (374).

cyborg-skeleton. Pelevin's were-creatures take turns howling at the skull, asking it to bring forth oil. Witnessing this ritual, A Hu-Li physically experiences meaning reduced to naught; at the same time, her lamentations are themselves a kind of meaningful gesture:

I felt as if the cow was looking at me with its empty eye sockets. And then, through the binoculars, I saw a tear well up on the edge of one of those sockets. [...] Alexander carried on howling, but I couldn't make out the meaning any more. Perhaps there no longer was any – the howling had turned into weeping [...] for ourselves and for our impossible country, for our pitiful life, stupid death and sacred hundred dollars a barrel ... (219-22)<sup>106</sup>

A Hu-Li is drawn into the ritual by virtue of the nostalgia and mourning that the cow skull inspires in her; considering Alexander's praise of her howling, it appears that it is even her own genuine lamentations that actually cause the skull to draw forth oil. However, as Alexander is quick to explain to her, the entire ritual is an act; the lamentation A Hu-Li witnessed in the others was a lie, a ploy to stir emotions only to produce oil – and not meaning, beauty, or art. A Hu-Li is manipulated by Alexander to serve his own ends, namely because she can still create out of the void, whereas he has become a pure force of destruction. The irony of this scene is that he incites her to create something that fuels meaningless and corrupt consumerism; the paradox of this scene is that she creates meaning out of the meaninglessness exhibited by the ritual through her heartfelt lamentations.

Ultimately, by the end of the novel Alexander has given himself completely over to the destructive nothingness of his predecessor Comrade Sharikov and of the apocalyptic canine

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<sup>106</sup> «Мне показалось, что корова смотрит на меня своими пустыми глазницами. А потом я увидела в свой бинокль, как на краю этой глазницы появилась и набухла слеза. [...] Александр продолжал выть, но я больше не разбирала смысла. Возможно, его уже не было – вой превратился в плач [...] о себе, о своей ни на что не похожей стране, о жалкой жизни, глупой смерти и заветном полтиннике за баррель ...» (252, 253).

Pizdets: he is buried in the archives (residing in a kind of death, not unlike Pizdets who guards the house of the death), researching how to better employ the super werewolf so as to “happen to” (make disappear, purge) enemies of the Russian state. In contrast, A Hu-Li decides to finally and fully embrace the productive void by becoming it, by reaching the highest state of enlightenment and thereby becoming nothing itself. Through her transformation into the void, she leaves behind the manuscript of the novel, along with remnants of clothing and a partially-melted bicycle, in a Moscow park. In the end, the manuscript we hold in our hands is the manuscript of the disappeared subject A Hu-Li, or the personal narrative of the productive void.

*Chapaev and Voyd* and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, written nearly a decade apart, both explore the notions that reality is a void, and that perception therefore creates “reality.” These notions are more maturely expressed in the were-creatures of Pelevin’s later novel, who corporeally embody the bifurcated realities that coexist in alternate dimensions in his earlier novel. Still, both novels present a productive nothingness in contrast to the nihilistic emptiness that Pelevin depicts in *Generation “P”*. Additionally, in contrast to *Generation “P”*, both *Chapaev and Voyd* and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* establish themselves as literary works by directly confronting those dissenting critics who consider Pelevin’s output to be meaningless garbage. They do so in a paradoxical way: by opening with “official” prefaces that seemingly attempt to delegitimize their main texts as literary art.

*Chapaev and Voyd* begins with a “Preface” that claims the text was written in a monastery in Inner Mongolia during the 1920s, by an author whose name cannot be mentioned. The preface is written by a certain Urgan Jambon Tulku VII, who claims that the text is a forgery, and that “the intention underlying the writing of this text was not to create a ‘work of literature,’ but to record the mechanical cycles of consciousness in such a way as to achieve a

complete and final cure for what is known as ‘the inner life’” (ix).<sup>107</sup> Read straightforwardly, this preface not only attempts to strip the main text of any literary merit it may possess, but also proposes impossible parameters within which the text arises: after all, it is difficult to believe that it was written in the 1920s, given the narrative’s accurate representation of post-Soviet Russia. Acting as the voice of authority, the preface attempts to delegitimize the text by establishing its fraudulence (it could not possibly be written in the manner claimed), and dissuades our reading of the text as literary art – we may read it as a psychological tract on consciousness, but to grant the text literary status would be a mistake, claims the preface’s author.

Similarly, *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* opens with a section titled “Commentary by Experts,” which authoritatively states, “The present text, which is also known under the title of ‘A Hu-Li’ is in fact a clumsy literary forgery, produced by an unknown author during the first quarter of the twenty-first century” (ix).<sup>108</sup> These experts go on to dwell upon the possibility that some readers might approach the text as literature, and to further discourage any such readers from doing so.

This text is not, of course deserving of any serious literary or critical analysis. Nonetheless, we would like to note that it presents such a dense interweaving of borrowings, imitations, rehashings and allusions (not to mention the poor style and the author’s quite exceptional puerility), that its authenticity or genuineness do not pose any

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<sup>107</sup> «Некоторая судорожность повествования объясняется тем, что целью написания этого текста было не создание 'литературного произведения,' а фиксация механических циклов сознания с целью окончательного излечения от так называемой внутренней жизни» (7).

<sup>108</sup> «Настоящий текст, известный также под названием 'А Хули,' является неумелой литературной подделкой, изготовленной неизвестным автором в первой четверти XXI века» (3).

question for serious literary specialists: it is interesting purely as a symptom of the profound spiritual decline through which our society is currently passing. (xi)<sup>109</sup>

These alleged experts describe the text through self-erasing and self-delegitimizing characterizations: yes, the text has all the trappings of a piece of literature, but it has *no* literary merit. It presents itself as literature, but it is not, they claim. This text that masquerades as literature but holds no literary worth is moreover seen to be an emblem of the “spiritual decline” of society. As with the preface to *Chapaev and Voyd*, this “Commentary by Experts” seemingly sets up the text as fraudulent, written by an unknown or unnamed author, and specifically *not* literature but instead a representation of the degraded workings of consciousness or the spirit.

However, both of these prefaces, by virtue of their didactic and disdainful readings of their main texts, actually contribute to the literary merit of the novels at which they turn up their collective critical nose. These prefaces express, first and foremost, the well-known and anticipated critical response to Pelevin’s writing: that it is garbage, light-weight philosophy or pop religion masquerading as literature.<sup>110</sup> Here, Pelevin directly confronts that which would reduce his art to the nihilistic meaningless void by incorporating those very meaning-negating criticisms into his novel’s form. Indeed, when we recall that the misleading preface is, of course, a common form of the novel (e.g. John Ray Junior’s “Forword” to *Lolita*), such dissent that seeks to delegitimize the literary merit of novel actually functions to increase the novel’s literary

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<sup>109</sup> «Этот текст не заслуживает, конечно, серьезного литературоведческого или критического анализа. Тем не менее отметим, что в нем просматривается настолько густая сеть заимствований, подражаний, перепетов и аллюзий (не говоря уже о дурном языке и редкостном инфантилизме автора), что вопроса о его аутентичности или подлинности перед серьезным специалистом по литературе не стоит, и интересен он исключительно как симптом глубокого духовного упадка, переживаемого нашим обществом» (5).

<sup>110</sup> For example, Andrei Nemzer calls *Generation “P”* “a vicious pamphlet infused with unconcealed pain.” Sergei Kornev writes, “looking at Pelevin, our national ‘creative intelligentsia’ feels like Adam thrown out of Eden” («Взирая на Пелевина, отечественная ‘творческая интеллигенция’ ощущает себя Адамом, изгнанным из рая после добровольного грехопадения»).

worth. By satirizing typical Russian critiques of his novels, Pelevin purposely faces up to his reputation as an impotent member of the failed intelligentsia who writes meaningless trash (this reputation we see embodied in the character Tatarsky), and incorporates that reputation into his novel's very form. *Chapaev and Voyd* and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* resurrect literature by finding meaning in the otherwise-nihilistic void, by finding literary merit in the very criticisms that would reduce their literary status to a meaningless nothing.

#### IV. Conclusion

Since the late 1990s, a prominent trend in various branches of Russian postmodernism has been to “restore the reality which had been destroyed by the aggression of simulacra” (Lipovetsky, *Russian Literary Postmodernism in the 1990s*, 12). This desire to restore reality and re-mythologize cultural myths coincides, paradoxically, with the deconstruction of binary oppositions, delegitimization of ideological paradigms, and with the demythologization of myths. We view this paradox at work in Pelevin's literary corpus, which illustrates, on the one hand, the lack of reality occasioned by the precession of simulacra and deconstruction of ideology (thereby evoking feelings of nostalgia at its best and nihilism at its worst), and on the other hand, attempts to restore reality by granting this “lack of reality” the utmost meaning. That is, Pelevin mythologizes the void itself; he makes meaninglessness meaningful. The absence of reality – the void – that is revealed through deconstruction and that generates simulacra becomes mythology, ideology, and meaning in Pelevin's writings: the void becomes the transcendental signified. This is how Pelevin “restores the reality which had been destroyed by the aggression of simulacra”: he makes meaningful this very lack of reality.

As a concept in Pelevin's work, the void cannot be reduced to a single meaning: in *Generation “P”*, the void is horrifying, reduces all to meaninglessness, creates inertia (fittingly,

many critics, including Genis, have commented on the “inertia” of Pelevin’s own writing in this novel, suggesting that he thereafter lay his pen to rest), and empties culture. In contrast, in *Chapaev and Voyd* and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, the void is a creative force, allows for freedom and the possibility of meaning. In all three cases, the void is immanent reality, but its own characteristics are just as varied and infinite as the “realities” it enables: it is both the predicament and salvation of postmodern culture, just as it produces the depressing world of Vavilen Tatarsky, the freedom for Petr Voyd to choose to live in early Soviet Russia, and the power for A Hu-Li to create and control the world around her.

As discussed throughout this chapter, this void is mythologized not only in the narrative-scape of his novels (through plot, theme, symbolism, aesthetics), but also in the very form his novels take – in various attempts to dismantle these as novels, some of which are possibly successful (*Generation “P”*), and some of which actually increase the literary worth of the novel in question (*Chapaev and Voyd*, *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*). In this way, Pelevin historicizes his writings: the non-novelistic form that they sometimes take, and especially their denial of any literary status, point to their awareness of the failure of literature in the modern project, and the danger of literature that attempts to dictate reality through ideas. His novels that actively deny their status as novels are symbiotically related to the crisis of literature that accompanies the trauma caused by the terrors of Stalinism and the collapse of the Soviet Union;<sup>111</sup> in rejecting their literary art, they draw attention to the potential pitfalls of literary endeavors, and especially to the danger of applying literature and ideology to reality. However, even while drawing attention to such danger, Pelevin’s writing demonstrates how all of reality is,

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<sup>111</sup> Many feel that the collapse of the Soviet Union was more traumatic to the Russian psyche than the gulags or even the Holocaust; people say they are still in the embrace of trauma, caused by the loss of unity. Additionally, the trauma of Stalinism is still felt as well. The nature of this trauma and its effects are topics that are still under debate today. See, for instance, the discussion between Mark Lipovetsky and Alexander Etkind, “The Salamander’s Return: The Soviet Catastrophe and the Post-Soviet Novel” (2010).

in a way, a literary text: “reality” is how one sees the world, the world created through one’s perception enabled by the void. The real danger Pelevin’s characters face is brought about by an inability to realize that they create the world through their own perception; when a character fails to realize this, he becomes slave to his own visions, just as the modern world became victim of its own ideology.

In consumerist culture literature disappears, becomes a meaningless void; this is observed in *Generation “P”*. But Pelevin also relates the void with writing literature (creating meaning and beauty), and with the production of reality itself. He first explores the positive and productive potentials of the void in 1996 with *Chapaev*, and then takes a pessimistic turn in 1999 with the nihilistic void of *Generation*. After a long pause, he produces the sacred book in 2004, and in doing so returns to the productive void – indeed, a sacred void that has taken the place of the transcendental signified. In the trajectory of these three novels, then, we witness Pelevin debating the various meanings and possibilities of the void, ultimately arriving at a paradoxical solution: the void generates perceptions of the world that precede the material reality of the world, perceptions that actually generate their own reality; in so doing, these perceptions regenerate the very void that enables them to be.

### **Conclusion** **Nothing as the Transcendental Signified**

Both Heidegger and Sartre understand the act of questioning as conditioned or characterized by nothing itself. In “What is Metaphysics?”, Heidegger argues that nothing allows for any questioning to take place. It is through this act of questioning and considering oneself that beings “come to themselves” (108) – that is, come into knowable and conscious existence. Nothing resides at the generative origin of this coming-into-being. Likewise, in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre puts forward the notion that every act of questioning is pierced through with a “triple non-being,” and is therefore “encompassed with nothingness” (28). Both philosophers situate the act of questioning as essential to the human condition, but, at the same time, they also position nothing as fundamental to the act of questioning. Nothing is therefore essential to the creation of man, or part-and-parcel to his being. When we talk about the being of man, we must also consider the question of nothing: the two go hand-in-hand.

The implications of this study are similarly grand: nothing is essential to the narrative act, to the creation of fiction, and therefore, any study of narrative or fiction must also take into account its relationship to nothing itself. The work of Nietzsche, Derrida, Bakhtin, and Kristeva lay the theoretical foundation for understanding nothing’s vital relationship to narrative. In effect, each of these thinkers consider nothing’s relationship to narrative in ways that are analogous to Heidegger’s and Sartre’s theories regarding being and its dependence upon nothing in order to exist in a meaningful manner. That is, nothing itself is essential to any act of narration – be it our unconscious and automatic perceptions and physical senses, our language that employs forever-shifting yet universal signifiers to paradoxically articulate specific and individual signifieds, our labored-over and thought-out fictions, or our religious, scientific, political, moral, empirical, and spiritual truths. All these are narratives of a kind, and all are

generated by a nothing at their very core. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, the work of Nabokov, Beckett, and Pelevin attest to this idea, each illustrating how nothing itself enables the creation of language, narrative, meaning, and even existence – especially as existence (our lived realities) cannot be separated from language, fictioning, and narration. In each of these three cases, a figuration of nothingness is foundational to the composition of narrative in its many forms.

Nabokov's work, which designates fiction as inseparable from reality ("reality"), figures nothing as the very element that enables patterning (meaning-making) to take place – a system known as "referential mania." The operation of referential mania, (connecting the dots between various events, images, and themes of one's life), creates a web of "realities," and ignites one's awareness of any and all meaningful "realities." For Nabokov, these possible "realities" are as varied as the number of referential maniacs – artists, poets, madmen, criminals, and, ultimately, *readers* who create meaning by seeing patterns that are otherwise not there. As possible "realities" are multiple and varied, so figurations of nothing are many in Nabokov's oeuvre. Naughts inscribed on bathroom walls, "voluptuous pauses," lakes or *ozeros* (0-zeros), ciphers, non-appearing/nonexistent/disappearing characters, trauma that eschews representation, plots that repeatedly arrive at nothing (interrupted pratfalls) – these are Nabokov's zeros, his signifiers of nothing that condition the full scope of "realities," which themselves are always narrative expressions and fictionalized experiences.

Beckett also considers words and narrative as inseparable from the world and being, and it is an immanent nothingness that conditions and couples together words with the world. Beckettian immanence is depicted as a nothingness that paradoxically consists of infinite being (human, animal, plant, mineral, animate, inanimate, etc.), and that compels narration. Immanent

nothingness therefore lies at the heart of all being and is the pulse of all narrative. *To be* always necessitates *to word*, and both are compulsions of immanent nothingness. For Beckett, such immanent nothingness is not exclusive to man's condition (as Sartre might argue), but is inherent in all. The entire world, conditioned by immanent nothingness, therefore narrates, and not necessarily in the language of man. Beckett's characters – utterly pared-down creatures, diminished in being's accoutrements much like Beckett's texts are divested of literary devices and narrative elements via an "aesthetics of lessness" – remind us, again and again, that they no longer speak in the language of men, yet are still obligated to speak in a language essential to being. The world around them languages, or words, as well: the construction of the beehive rests upon the language of the bees; gardens murmur, doors murmur, murmurs murmur, "the murmurs are coming," always coming (*The Unnamable* 414); as long as there *is*, "you must say words" (ibid) – in short, voices of "the world collapsing endlessly" (*Molloy* 40) permeate Beckett's narratives. Nothingness resides at the heart of Beckettian words and world, which together comprise an indivisible, mutually-dependent relationship.

Both Nabokov and Beckett, in their own subtle ways, position nothing as the truest form of reality, or as the real laid bare. For Nabokov, "reality" stripped of its quotation marks is nothing itself – a nonexistent or blacked-out answer, for instance, as in "Ultima Thule," or a real life that does not exist, as in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. For Beckett, nothingness is immanence – true and essential being that lacks all decoration and any construct. By the time we reach the work of Pelevin, the status of nothing as reality is made explicit: for Pelevin, the void is synonymous with reality and truth – it is being's true form. Pelevin's novels repeatedly put forward the question of reality itself (what is *is*?), and consistently come up with the same answer: *is* is void. At the same time, Pelevin's works exhibit, first of all, a remarkable self-

awareness regarding their own lineage of Russian literature (which was long the keeper of sacred truth in Russia), and second of all, a hyper-awareness of their status as postmodernist fiction in a postmodern literary worldscape. Of course, the revered tradition of Russian literary logos is arguably dismantled after the terror of totalitarianism, and many contemporary theorists consider the literary word in post-Soviet Russia to be illegitimate, debunked, impotent, and completely emptied of meaning; likewise, it is commonly argued that postmodernist literature is also an illegitimate logos, utterly lacking in meaning or form. It is with a noted self-awareness of the legacy of Russian literature's relationship to truth and its current potential demise, and with a hyperawareness of postmodernism and its discontents (everything is relative, so everything is meaningless!), that Pelevin's novels present the void as the truest reality; in the wake of what many view as the emptying of all literary logos of meaning, Pelevin's works present emptiness – the void – as meaning itself. As such, by presenting the void as the truest reality, Pelevin's novels recuperate literature's ability to convey meaning, even as they sometimes refuse, in their form and function, to be literary novels. To write about the void as the truest reality is, in effect, to reinvent the literary logos.

As such, nothing takes the place of the absent transcendental signified in our contemporary literary and cultural conditions. In "Chapter One" of this study, Derrida's conception of an *absent* transcendental signified was discussed in relation to the play of signifiers that endlessly invent meaning. However, Derrida's conception of an *absent* transcendental signified does not preclude an alternative and – I would argue – more accurate understanding of this transcendental signified as *nothing* itself: as an always-already nothing that has forever allowed and still allows for the play and endless shuffling of signifiers, and the subsequent creation and proliferation of meaning. In the forty-plus years since Derrida first wrote

about the absent transcendental signified, we have moved far away from a world where the transcendental signified is a reality. Thus, in a culture where a stable, positive, and present transcendental signified is evermore considered to be a “never-was,” illusion, or fairytale of the past, the contrast between an absent and a present transcendental signified becomes null and void – and, fittingly, nothing as the transcendental signified takes the place of the absent transcendental signified.

Derrida’s notions regarding the play of signifiers set into endless motion by virtue of an absent (lost) controlling center can, and should, be reconceived to position nothing at the ever-differing/deferring center. The play of signifiers is not instigated by an absence that either carries with it an expectation of a presence or is conditioned in opposition to a presence, but rather play is enabled by a total lack of any controlling and limiting presence, by an unaccommodated nothing that makes no demands and therefore allows for “signification *ad infinitum*” – signification without any limits. Furthermore, when nothing functions as the transcendental signified there is no nostalgia, which automatically accompanies the absence of a transcendental signified – for the *loss* of the transcendental signified that such an absence presumes instigates lamentation and longing for the past, or at least an acknowledgement of a present lack. Rather, nothing as the transcendental signified indicates no loss, and therefore no need for nostalgia or lamentation; rather, it sets the stage for affirmative and creative free play that is enabled by and takes advantage of the potential afforded by nothing. Nothing as the transcendental signified is something to celebrate, while absence as the transcendental signified is something to mourn.

It is with this end in mind that Nabokov, Beckett, and Pelevin in particular were chosen for the central focus of this study: nothing ultimately comes to occupy the place of the transcendental signified through a kind of Hegelian dialectic that first posits nothing as the

generator of all subjective signifiers and meaning (Nabokov), then positions nothing as the signified and objective world itself (Beckett), and finally figures nothing as both signifier (e.g. zero) and signified (nothing; void) – the interaction of the nothing subject with the nothing world (Pelevin). The trajectory traced from Nabokov to Beckett, and from Beckett to Pelevin, illustrates this dialectic from the signifier of nothing, to the signified as nothing, to transcendental signified, in addition to its signifiers (those infinite analogues of zero), as nothing as well.

Nabokov's work demonstrates how the proliferation of meaning, (the generation of countless signifiers and their ever-shifting, meaning-making patterns), is always a creation by the subject who reads into nothing. His narratives concentrate on these signifiers as the realm where meaning resides; to search for the signified itself is to search for nothing that is, indeed, the truest reality, but that is wholly without meaning. For Nabokov, meaning does not begin to happen until one moves away from the signified (nothing) and toward those signifiers of nothing (zeros). So his works embrace endless signification; they reveal and revel in those infinite and subjective varieties of nothing's signifiers, and not the nothing itself.

In contrast, Beckett attempts to shut down signification in order to get at the real thing – that is, nothing – laid bare. He is interested in the immanent nothingness that comprises the objective world, and therefore attempts to strip his subjects of their subjectivities (of their "I"s) in order to grasp their true, objective, unaccommodated being. Beckett's work therefore represents a shift in comparison with Nabokov's: instead of an embrace of endless signification, and in place of an emphasis on those signifiers of nothing, Beckett focuses on nothing as the signified, as the objective world. In doing so, of course, he unearths a seeming paradox: language (a narrative of signifiers) is intimately part of any and all being (the signifieds).

While this paradox plagues Beckett's many characters who want to but cannot cease language and therefore cease signification, in the work of Pelevin, this paradox is fully embraced, and moreover figures as a defining statement of the postmodern literary condition. In Pelevin's narratives, nothing is welcomed as the transcendental signified that is, at the same time, the signifier. That is, nothing as the transcendental signified grants his characters' various perceptions (signifiers of nothing) the power to control and generate their worlds, thereby recreating objective reality, remaking their very own transcendental signified. Nothing as the transcendental signified is therefore the ever-deferring generator of a system of signifiers that perpetually recreate their own original transcendental signified. Because of this, nothing as the transcendental signified is an *infinite* nothing that constantly transforms depending on its own signifiers' significations. The origin – nothing as the transcendental signified – paradoxically becomes the realization of its own signifiers, is constructed by its own signifiers. Pelevin's void is simultaneously the word and the world; the signified as nothing and signifiers of nothing become, in effect, synonyms. The subjective word *is* the objective world.

As we have seen, the literary texts I have chosen for this study demonstrate in their own form and thematic preoccupations this very relationship between nothing and narrative, in addition to the relationship between nothing and being. For Nabokov, Beckett, and Pelevin, nothing is the narrative force that generates the world that is wholly tied up in the word. Of course, should we try to examine nothing (as they do), to look at nothing laid bare, we find that it does not exist in the purest sense – not as an absence, a loss of something that once was, but as a never-was and never-will-be. Nothing is therefore the *ultimate fiction*: that unreal and untrue story that renders the world meaningful, experiential, comprehensible – in a word, narratable.

Here, we should recall that for Nabokov, Beckett, and Pelevin, nothing is also the truest or most real reality. Consequently, this *ultimate fiction* is also the ultimate truth. It happens that existence and narrative, being and language, world and word, are grounded in and nurtured by this most powerful and universal of all fictions: that is, nothing.

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