
ON THE NOTION OF NOTHING

J. WILMOT AND METAPHYSICS IN IMAGES

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Abstract

The article deals with the issue of language representation of Nothing as a metaphysical object. It explains why the problem of actual existence of such abstractions becomes the subject of discussion in semiotics, stylistics and poetic theory. It's assumed that the abstraction emerges as a result of poetic games with language. The metaphysical poem 'Upon Nothing' by J. Wilmot serves as a textual basis to show ways and means of visualization of nothing. Among them there is localization implying the usage of deictic and predicate signs, intertextual allusions, etc. The iconic image (or rather, the icon-scheme) of the abstraction by which the poet, so to say, amplifies metaphysics gives a chance to penetrate into the sphere of something that lies beyond words.

Keywords: metaphysical object, representation, iconic image, abstraction, visualization

1. Introduction

Modern philosophical metaphysics defines objects of its analysis as absolute [1-3]. In his attempts to imagine and cognize metaphysical objects (e.g. the Absolute, Eternity) man approaches the limits of his cognitive abilities. Nothing is the most paradoxical among metaphysical abstractions. Negative semantics of the prefix makes us think about emptiness, the absence of something. The following problem arises: is this cognitive operation possible? Indeed, when an individual resides in the existing world he can not imagine what a non-existing world looks like [4]. Any attempts to describe non-existent essences result in the situation where metaphysics is pointless: language having reached the limits of representation 'is broken' because a-priori it is not suitable for metaphysical purposes [3]. And the history of metaphysical philosophy and metaphysical poetry is nothing but a series of experiments on language representation of abstractions. The work shows that representing Nothing J. Wilmot intuitively finds that mechanism of creating its visual images that is also used by modern philosophy. The metaphor and the narrative are common methods in the discourse of Philosophy and metaphysical poetry.

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The analysis of the concept of Nothing in European philosophy [5, 6] is not the specific objective of this study because of the limited size of this article and the authors' wish to focus on tools of representation of this notion in the poem *On Nothing* by one of the most famous English metaphysical poets John Wilmot [7]. The ontological status of Nothing will be considered within the semiotic paradigm. What does the word 'nothing' mean? Any sign refers to an extralinguistic object and the word 'nothing' is not an exception here [8]. Maybe this is the reason which makes Polish-American poet Cheslav Milosh believe in the reality of existence of abstract objects:

“Plato and his ideas: hares, foxes, horses run on the earth and disappear,
but somewhere above permanent ideas of hareness, foxiness, horseness
exist,
side by side with the idea of triangle and the Archimedes' principle, and
they
will not be disproved and abolished by chaotic and doomed to death
empirey.” [9]

Abstract objects belong to the 'other' side of the world which can be seen only after death:

“When I die, I will see the lining of the world.

The other side, beyond bird, mountain, sunset.” ('Meaning') [10]

However even in our life we easily find them in our consciousness in the form of texts or text fragments. The authors of abstractions are two great constructive creators: language and culture [11, 12].

So, we assume that Nothing is a sign which referent is constructed in culture by means of linguistic elements and the instruments of narration. But what is the mechanism of its origination? This is the universal algorithm of reality representation developed in the framework of logical-semiotic approach: nomination of the object, fulfilled simultaneously as its predication and location [13-15]. The name introduces the referent substituted by it into the sphere of thinking, the predicate of existence points out to the fact of the object's existence in the world. External and internal predicates, attributed to the name of the abstraction allow to judge about its relations with other objects of the world and properties it possesses. As a result, Nothing gets some degree of reality in the world, illustrating the principle *esse est percipi*: to exist means to be perceived.

2. Representation of nothing as linguistic game

Let us say some words about the poet who was one of the first to make non-existence the object of reflection: John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester (1647-1680) - a poet of Restoration Epoch, one of the most impenetrable of English poets. Wilmot is paradoxical: being a court wise-cracker he was the author of keen satire and pamphlets for Karl II, a light-hearted aristocrat, who loved life in all its manifestations and a misanthrope, a profligate and a tender husband, the author of philosophical verse about God and Man, he was anathematized as the personification of evil. He is a subtle lyrist and a metaphysicist from the pleiad

of Cambridge neo-Platonists who believed that philosophy and poetry belong to the same sphere of rational and sensitive cognition. Mysterious is not only his personality but the exact amount of texts left after him [5, 16-19].

Pre-text interpretation of Nothing is determined by linguistic competence of the reader and the volume of his encyclopaedic knowledge. In our case these are the answers to the questions: what does the word Nothing mean, what do I know about the philosophy of nihilism, about the history of this concept in European philosophy? The word entries in thesauruses and philosophic encyclopaedias can be the starting point of interpretation.

In everyday logic NOTHING (the non-existence of all things) is a fascinating and at the same time frightening notion which means a kind of absolute vacuum. Finally, we deal with 'nothing as empty speculation and a waste of time' while looking for non-existing meanings and endless attempts to answer the question if Nothing exists [20, 21]. In analytical philosophy Nothing is already 'something' which exists (NOTHING, THE) though we will never be able to face it. Nothing is a potential of the world (the manifestation of things possible) [22]. As in the case of negative numbers its existence is described in the modus of negative meanings [21].

Both language and semiotic philosophers share the same opinion that using the words with negative semantics we assert 'the existence of non-existence' and can not resist our language which gave Nothing a subject meaning and fixed it as something real by force of its reference. Language does not allow us even to doubt the existence of Nothing that is why "from the space of natural language metaphysical terms look pointless" [23, 24].

All this context of thinking is only the starting point from which the analysis of the ways of artistic representation of Nothing begins. For the poet (to a greater extent than for a philosopher) the companion of thought is visualization. He creates something from Nothing: so that we can perceive it and emotionally respond to it. Let us systemize Wilmot's linguistic games at the same time considering them as possibilities for actualization of abstractions used in literature.

2.1. Localization of abstraction

Localization of abstraction is an operation which suggests the necessity to place Nothing into space-time coordinates of the world, thus providing reference for this abstract sign. The localization tools are deictic elements of language and predicate signs which represent object attributes. In order to declare the reality of Nothing Wilmot uses an existential predicate:

"Nothing! <...> That hadst a Being ere the World was made <...>.

From the hands of Nothing or from fruitful Emptiness's Hand everything that exists appeared: first, it was something ('something straight begot'), then a great unity of existing things – 'Snatch'd Men, Beasts, Birds, Fire, Air, and Land'. And that is why Nothing became the universal attribute of all things of

the world ('the general Attribute of all'; 'with Form and Matter, Time and Place did join')." [7]

Wilmot actualizes Nothing attributing to it those properties which in the language experience of the reader correlate with states and attributes of human beings. It is of Ending not afraid, able to bribe time (Time <...> brib'd by thee), but can not humiliate Virtue (from the Virtuous nothing tak'st away). The poet personifies Nothing asserting that it has a Face, a Womb, a Bosom, that it is a Self and that its generation line can be found (Line). In particular, Nothing is not alone in the world because it is the elder Brother of Shadow (thou Elder Brother ev'n to Shade).

2.2. Inclusion of the sign into the sphere of synonymic and antonymic paradigms

Essential characteristics of Nothing are found through inclusion of the sign into the sphere of synonymic and antonymic paradigms. With every new introduced synonym (including a contextual one) a full range of meanings of the abstraction is presented: Nothing as Negation, Emptiness, Mystery, mighty Power, the sole Original of Something. The contradictory character of Great Nothing is shown through the collision of contextual antonyms. It is primitive in the sense that it can be understood but at the same time has no limits ('boundless') and incomprehensible. It is 'fruitful' but nonetheless it wants to swallow everything ('hungry Womb') in order to reduce the world to its size.

2.3. Stylistic registers

In the process of actualization of the abstract referent the play with stylistic registers is actively used. First Wilmot considers Nothing in the framework of philosophic and theological discourses as a universal metaphysical notion: "That hadst a Being ere the World was made". His Nothing is a source of universality. It gave birth to Something and then to all which exists:

"When primitive Nothing something straight begot,
Then all proceeded from the great united . . . What?
Something <...>." [7]

And isn't Nothing visible? Wilmot sees it beside him in King's circle, in pseudo-clever speeches of philosophers. Why does it - the source of all existing things - allow emptiness and foolishness to rule the world?

"But Nothing, – why does Something still permit
That sacred Monarchs should at Council sit,
With Persons highly thought at best for Nothing fit?" [7]

In the framework of satirical discourse Wilmot uses Nothing as a tool of blaming. Nothing is the other side of French sincerity – 'French Truth', 'Dutch Prowess', 'British Policy', 'Hibernian Learning', 'Scotch Civility', 'Spaniards' Dispatch', 'Danes' Wit'. This is the assessment of King's treasury house (Princes' Coffers), 'Statemen's Brains', 'Kings' Promises', 'The great Man's

Gratitude to his best Friend', 'Whores' vows'. In the end Nothings, foolishness and nullities rule the world:

“And Nothing there, like stately Nothing, reigns.

Nothing <...> reigns, dwell'st with Fools.” [7]

But the final accord of the text sounds philosophically again. The great and the poor, the wise and the fool, the mighty and the downtrodden - all of them must die and so return into the 'bosom' of Great Nothing:

“The great Man's Gratitude to his best Friend,

Kings' Promises, Whores' vows, towards thee may bend,

How swiftly into thee, and in thee ever end.” [7]

The meanings of the word 'nothing' in different stylistic registers contribute to each other producing a kind of semantic mosaic. The typical wish of 'any metaphysical poet is not only to dissect the object of thinking but to show its multi-facial essence.

2.4. Relations with other cultural texts

Representation of Nothing is also performed through semantic relations with other cultural texts. The reader even without a direct author's indication to intertextual context notices the similarity of Wilmot's ideas of the world creation and, for example, those found in the epic poem *Paradise Lost* by John Milton. The beast world appears from 'reverend dusky Nothing', in the same way as it happens in Milton's poem. Gradually it acquires vague features becoming 'the great united what' which in its turn will get back to its original state of emptiness ('into thy boundless Self must undistinguish'd fall'):

“In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth

Rose out of Chaos <...>

What in me is dark

Illumine, what is low raise and support; <...>

Heav'n hides nothing from thy view <...>” [25]

In spite of the fact that intertextual relations are established here in associative way (every reader can extend the circle of sources), references to other texts allow to specify or 'confirm' the ideas of Nothing as the starting point of our world and then fix these images in culture.

3. Nothing as a result of linguistic game

We emphasize that the ontological question about Nothing is transferred into semiotic, stylistic and poetic spheres because the idea of Nothing originates as a result of linguistic games. The iconic image of the abstraction with which the poet supplements metaphysics allows to get a relative access into the sphere of transcendent and verbally inexpressible. Visualizing an abstract object of thinking an artist makes it a construct of culture. In this context we point out that artistic interpretation of Nothing in Wilmot's text is close to the position of

representatives of nihilism and even physical conceptions which state the Universe's birth out of emptiness: pure vacuum, nothing [26].

The process in which a non-existing object acquires a kind of flesh [27] is essential for an individual artistic style. Wilmot 'collects' the non-observable referent as mosaic. First, absolute absence actualizes itself in a series - paradigm of names: Nothing, Emptiness, Enigma, Something. In predication it gets characteristics. From the range of possible variants for building the flesh of Nothing (visualization of form, colour, smell, movement, character etc.) Wilmot chooses socio-discursive aspect.

His Nothing is actualized as an abstract subject who has personified dimensions (character, interests, biography, history) and is introduced into the world and society as the source of their evolution (it rules the world). Interestingly, the poet attributes to abstract Nothing the features far beyond the level of ordinary people: his Nothing thinks with global categories. As leaders and prophets this character has a potential of thinking abilities which does not contradict its primitivism of actions in habitual situations. Nothing is cruel, egocentric in its wish to reduce the world to its size. It is everywhere and is present in everything which makes up human life. People and things will inevitably disappear dissolving in original emptiness. But even in life Nothing is the other side of policy, speeches, philosophers, deeds of friends and women, kings' promises.

In semiotic terms actualization of Nothing takes place by way of an **icon-scheme**. This is determined by predicate signs ascribed to the name of the abstraction.

The poet either declares the existence of Nothing in the world ('That hadst a Being ere the World was made'), or points out that its features are other abstractions (Emptiness, Mystery), or speaks about mental and emotional states of this character ('not afraid'). In the end, Nothing as the common attribute of all existing things remains schematic and inaccessible for direct understanding. It is not by chance, that Wilmot can not establish a dialogue with his own Nothing though he introduces it to physical reality. Nothing is his invisible and silent listener to whom he addresses his message 'On Nothing'. The presence of this listener, but not an interlocutor is emphasized by the forms of pronouns and verbs in the 2nd person (thou, thee, thy, art, dwell'st, tak'st, didst, hadst). It is inevitable in such situation that the contemplation of an external object, which has no visible form is naturally transformed into introspection [27]. Both, Wilmot and his reader, analyze the abstraction through the dialogue with their own self, language and culture.

4. Conclusions

The problem of description and language representation of nonexistent objects interests not only philosophic metaphysics and logic but literature as well. In these intellectual spheres the creation of ultimate objects takes place, only in language and texts they become real and perceivable. But what is the

benefit of things beyond human existence? Possibly a man, as a temporal creature while thinking about Non-existence broadens the limits of his finite world. For that we need an ontological assumption: beyond the physical world another transcendent world exists which supplements and extends our reality.

It is also important that the process of representation of abstractions improves cognitive abilities of man. Linguistic games – connected with the representation of negative objects - broaden the limits of thinking. It is not enough to say about ultimate objects belonging to emptiness, nowhere, timelessness that non-existence exists. Poetry creating the image of an abstraction works as a “colossal accelerator of thinking” [28]. There’s one more important remark. Visualizations of metaphysical abstractions are possible only with verbal language. In painting and music we can create the feeling of non-existence, but we can not name non-existence. And if we do not have a sign we can not launch the processes of interpretation and cognition.

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