

Martin D. Henry (*ITQ*, vol. 68/4, 2003, 324)

## **On Nothing**

A famous sonnet by the seventeenth-century Spanish poet Góngora, on the instability and inevitable decay of all human life, even the most beautiful, ends with an unforgettable evocation of the actual process itself of final human disintegration ‘into earth, smoke, dust, shadow, nothingness’ (‘en tierra, en humo, en polvo, en sombra, en nada’). The ‘extraordinary falling cadence’ (Arthur Terry) of this line, mirroring the transformation of human life on its final journey into annihilation, is clearly echoed at the end of the century by the last great poetic figure of the Spanish ‘Golden Age’, the Hieronymite Mexican nun, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, one of whose sonnets, describing a flattering portrait, ends with the memorable line: ‘it is a corpse, it is dust, it is shadow, it is nothing’ (‘es cadáver, es polvo, es sombra, es nada’).

Moving, even thrilling, though such images of human extinction, and of its inexorability, can undoubtedly be, they do also, by their sheer beauty, seem to undermine the straightforward message they appear so triumphantly to enunciate. It is almost as if language itself were incapable of encapsulating or incarnating fully convincingly the notion of ‘nothing’; even the idea of ‘nothing’, a moment’s reflection tells us, is itself ‘something’, and hence is itself a contradiction of the very thing that thought is trying to conceptualize. Both poetic imagination and prosaic analysis coincide

therefore, in this case, in suggesting the, at best, precarious status of the concept of ‘nothing’, if not its outright meaninglessness (‘the idea of an absolute nothingness has as much meaning as the idea of a round circle’, as Bergson has it<sup>1</sup>).

Language’s ‘happy fault’ in this respect, its failure to be able to conceive of ‘nothing’ may, for some perhaps, be a sad admission of the unfortunately inescapable reality of existence, the indestructibility of what Schopenhauer called the ‘will-to-live’. For others, the same fault will be seen to support rather than to subvert religion’s sense not just of the ontological superiority of life over death, or (more abstractly) of being over nothingness, but also of life’s inevitable, ultimate victory over death. Thus, even the baroque pessimism in which, for a Sor Juana, the high hopes of Renaissance humanism were finally buried, can be viewed dialectically as an affirmation of the pull of eternity.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in L. Kolakowski, *Religion* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1982), 74.