

PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE: TWO LINES OF FUSION*

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In the article "The Fusion of Philosophy and Literature in Nihilist Thought" (Problemos 2010, 77) I argued that post-metaphysical philosophy should intensify its dialogue with literature to the point of their eventual fusion. In this paper I will start from the conclusions of my previous article and will highlight two possible lines of this fusion:

- 1) *The disappearance of the boundary between reality and fiction. Once we let go of the correspondence theory of truth, as Vattimo recommends, we will arrive at the principled possibility of the truthfulness of any and all narratives. Nihilist thought is characterised by a weakened sense of reality, a renouncement of common sense and naturalism. This condition, described by Nietzsche, where making a distinction between the real world and tall tales is impossible in principle, has several far-reaching epistemological and ethical consequences.*
- 2) *In its fusion with literature, nihilist thought seeks for a language to articulate the nothing, to represent the unrepresentable. In the paper I will analyse this pursuit by way of the concepts of postmodernity, the space of literature, and anxiety. I will draw on the views of Maurice Blanchot, Roland Barthes and Jean-François Lyotard.*

By fusing with literature, nihilist philosophy can continue in a situation where it has nothing to say.

Keywords: *nihilism, hermeneutics, fictionality, nothingness, postmodern*

1st line of thought – the fable

I would like to believe that today we have reached a situation where we do not have to defend literary works from the Platonist mimetic approach, even though the voice

of positivism has not been entirely subdued. Here we proceed from the presupposition that a literary work is characterised by a certain level of autonomy, it is a self-enclosed, significant whole that does not require justification as a reflection of

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“reality”. Certainly, as Derrida notes – and here his position seems to coincide with that of hermeneutics – every text takes its place in a particular context, and opens up during acts of reading (Derrida 1992: 45). I do not know if there is any point to the question whether there is a finite or an infinite number of possible interpretations of a text, but in any case I would not foresee a particularly bright future for any theory that purports to comprehensively map all possible paths of interpretation. Every literary work possesses a singularity that is not reducible to theory (ibid: 15).

What can we conclude from this? The above should not be understood as presenting the common notion that fictional space, generated by autonomous art, is located side by side with reality, influencing it. This position, completely plausible in common sense and according to scientific realism, is put into question in nihilist thought. The common sense distinction between real and fictional space amounts to an evasion of nihilism, but in discussing reality, a thought without a metaphysical foundation must also forego epistemic certainty. In nihilism, the dichotomy of truth and appearance has disappeared, after which everything is possible. As Nietzsche elsewhere notes: everything that can be thought of must be a fiction (Nietzsche 1988, vol. 13: 332).

In a recently translated collection, *Art's Claim to Truth* (Vattimo 2008), Vattimo argues, drawing on Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art*, that works of art do not integrate themselves peacefully into “objective” reality, but will rather push the prior world into a crisis. The work consti-

tutes a new world (ibid: 99). From this perspective, a work of art must be evaluated by whether it can create, that is, fabricate a world. This can also be achieved by a work usually considered mass culture; Vattimo, for example, mentions James Bond movies (ibid: 105), and I would add the works of Tolkien. If we accept the common point of view that the world comes into existence in language, as a narrative (this is equally true of the world based on sensations and sense data), we can agree with Heidegger that poetry has primacy as the art form that sets up a world (Heidegger 1980: 40).

What constitutes the fables, what distinguishes them from one-another? This we may consider at the background of the very possibility of language. Every fable is a particular significant and formal whole, an organized field – a successful work of poetry sets up a world, but the borders of this world do not necessarily coincide with the borders of the work. In literature, this wholeness frequently amounts to rhythmic cohesion (e.g. alliteration, rhyme) – the connection between literature and music, sound and significance are some of the more important connections (Gadamer 1985: 251). It is worth remembering that in myths, the world is frequently created by a song of creation (for the identity of *Logos-mythos* in fables, cf. Lacoue-Labarthe 1985: 49–50).

If the fable is literary, it is, in Barthes's terminology, a *text of pleasure*. “Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading” (Barthes 1975: 14). The fable is a story, something

that fits together, although certainly the level of interconnectedness, or the intensity by which one is drawn into the text, is different for different fables (compare e.g. old myths with contemporary comic books). In a fable there operates the magical function of language, the truth. Although Lacoue-Labarthe, in his analysis of Nietzsche's treatment of fiction, emphasizes fiction's refusal of truth (1985: 47), this refusal is, in my assessment, only valid for the correspondence theory. Truth understood as unhiddenness is, however, the very guarantee for the fable's holding itself together.

In nihilist thought, where truth is unhidden to untruth, we have no good reason not just for distinguishing between literature and philosophy, but also between fiction and reality. There is no reality and appearance, but merely an endless number of entwined and rebounding fables. Thus nihilist thought stands against the common theory of fiction, according to which nothing but "as-if" games are played in creating fictions (Currie 1990; Walton 1990). In nihilist thought, the word "world" has no other sense than a tangle of fables.

The thesis of the above paragraph may sound radical, but it certainly is not an original one, for several well-known contemporary thinkers have argued something similar. In addition to Vattimo, the above position can be derived from e.g. Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra (Baudrillard 1994). We will also reach the same conclusion from Gilles Deleuze's transcendental empiricism, where the virtual is the substance of the real, the virtual field of singular possibilities generates an

endless number of combinations, and the perceptible world is thus but one of many (Deleuze 1990). According to Deleuze, expressions such as "actual reality" and "virtual reality" are value judgements, something similar to when we call one person familiar and the other a stranger. And assuredly our fabulated ontology can find support from Nietzsche: reality as a forever changing combination of the points of perspective established by the will to power (Nietzsche 1988, vol. 12: 23–25). We could also highlight Nelson Goodman's treatment of world-making in language through the fabrication of facts (Goodman 1978). It may also be that Rorty's treatment of the contingency of vocabularies falls in line with the position propounded here – at the very least Rorty expresses clearly his position of the futility of separating philosophy from literature (Rorty 1989: 83). On the other hand, critics have pointed out Rorty's failure to accept the possibility of the fictional nature of the world, and his acceptance of the common sense view of a mind-independent reality (Lamarque, Olsen 1996: 203–204).

Today, the intertwining of literary works (and other works of art) and the "reality" of common sense into a unitary fable is not a mere whimsical philosophical hypothesis, but part of everyday practice. Thus, for example, there is the widespread phenomenon of *Live Action Role-play*, a complete melding into a fictional world, such as e.g. J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. True enough, when it comes to developing fables, traditional literature does succumb to the virtual possibilities of information technology. Ordinarily, at-

tempts to bring diversity into reality are treated as aberrance by the terror of common sense, by the repressive play of the concepts of in-truth/in-pretence. People who have been drawn deeply into a particular fiction are ridiculed or even isolated. There is, for example, an anecdotal story of an event in the women's sauna in Moscow, late 1980s, where a woman enters and cries out: "You are all washing yourself in peace, but Maria's (the star of the soap opera "Simply Maria") mother has died!" This episode seems to me as poetic as Nietzsche's fragment on "the madman" in *The Gay Science* (Nietzsche 1988, vol. 3: 480–481). It ought to be noted that the separation of in-truth/in-pretence is also problematic from the viewpoint of hermeneutic thought; it was already Gadamer who spoke of the coming into being of reality in play, of the primacy of the game for the players (Gadamer 1990: 110), and Vattimo's theory of the fabulation of reality proceeds from truth as a game (Vattimo 1986: 26).

The tragic clashes between fables are also part of the game, such as the row that began in the virtual environment *Second Life*¹ and found its conclusion in a murder committed in the "first life" (Stanage 2007). William Golding's novel *The Lord of the Flies* has become a textbook example of how the disappearance of the pressure of civilization leads to the rules of morality being forgotten (Pojman 2001: 14–19). On the other hand, this novel can be considered as a prime example of how a new world is created in the seriousness

of play – a godlike game beyond good and evil (Nietzsche 1988, vol. 11: 201). It is of course not a coincidence that the protagonists of *The Lord of the Flies* are all children, especially predisposed towards playing.

I will not begin to speculate here about the extent to which the fashioning of reality in the play of fables is economically viable; taking sense experience into account is certainly necessary to a degree. I will merely propose the hypothesis that the fear of fables becoming mixed up may result from the foundational (metaphysical) thinking acquired from "reality" (today, the name of this foundationalism is scientific realism). Milan Kundera notes that the history of Western novel from Cervantes to Kafka is, unlike philosophy (and probably science as well), the story of hesitation, of wanderings, where there are no answers, only questions and the ambiguity of the either-or (Kundera 2000: 8). We are fully aware of how much of our basic education is dedicated to science and how little to the free play of the arts. The novels of Milan Kundera are indeed a perfect example of how the authority of weakness (Lacoue-Labarthe 1985: 55), the vattimo-esque weak thinking operates.

Derrida calls literature an institution that allows one to say everything (Derrida 1992: 36). Once we add to this observation our ontological considerations about the fable, the current tendency towards the fragmentation, the dissipation of reality, we are forced to ask: why are we witnessing an increase in furious attacks against art coming from the common sense "reality" position? This I deem to be the consequence of

¹ <http://secondlife.com/>

the ever-deepening nihilism, the last stand of the perishing idea of a singular reality. We are all aware of, say, the attempts at outlawing writers who have insulted Islam, but there are other examples of art being repressed. Why is there excellent literature being written in totalitarian states – e.g. Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*? It is not in the least because they are socially loaded, because of the necessity of criticizing and reshaping the oppressive “reality” with the help of metaphors, as positivism asserts. Instead, the external, prohibitive pressure helps artists to better get into fables, it mobilises art, intensifies the magical force of language. An example of this is provided by the pathetic scene near the end of the film *Quills*, where the tongue of marquis de Sade is cut off to prevent him from shouting obscenities, and he is deprived of all writing instruments. But still he continues in a persistent mania to write on the walls with his own excrement.

De Sade’s writing pushes to the extreme the first slope of literature that Simon Critchley calls ‘prose’ in his in-depth analysis of Blanchot (Critchley 2002: 71), and which in the context of the present research can be called fabulating thought. This kind of writing sees itself in the mirror of revolution by going to the very extreme, which leads to the denial of prior existing reality and an absolute, terrorizing freedom for creation (Critchley 2002: 59). With respect to the fabulating writing, Blanchot brings out an aspect that can be associated with our previous analysis as follows: if a literary work sets up a world, it will thereby destroy the prior sense of a pre-linguistic world. Thus in speech, there is always a

death hidden in the form of a negation of that which precedes the literary work (Blanchot 1999b: 380). Of course, this line of reasoning does not constitute proof of the existence of a pre-linguistic world.

The autonomy of literature suggests that everything allowed by language can be thought of in literature. Consequently, in the absolute freedom of literature, everything is allowed. Because of the real world turning into a tall tale, this principle is carried over to “reality” (which is now but a collection of fables). Dostoyevsky’s greatest fear – that if there is no God, everything is allowed – becomes reality. However, it naturally remains possible to create and spread narratives that fabulate gods or attempt to establish morality on the paradox of the relativity of truth (Vattimo’s ethics is one such narrative, Vattimo 2004: 37–48).

The fact that “reality” is intensifying attacks against fiction demonstrates that the force of validity of the discourse of “singular reality” is dissipating, that it sees in alternative realities competition to its own primacy. The struggle against art is the desperate agony of the last men (Nietzsche 1988, vol. 4: 19–20) fleeing from nihilism. So far, so good!

The madness of the fable

I can already hear the ever-loudening cries of rational readers: this is madness! And so it should be, for only in this way do we have any hope of escaping from the iron cage of rationality and into free play. In developing this conception, a central place is occupied by Shoshana Felman’s paper ‘Madness and Philosophy, or Literature’s

Reason.’ By an analysis of the respective positions of Foucault and Derrida, the author concludes that *literature is the buffer zone between madness and thought* (Felman 1975: 220). With respect to reason, and thereby understanding, madness is *the other*, never to be adequately expressed in language (as Derrida (1997) emphasized in his criticism of Foucault). Nevertheless, madness, this thing that cannot be expressed as *logos*, does appear as a metaphor in the *pathos* of a literary text (Derrida 1997: 37).

Why should literature’s role as a mediator between reason and madness be deemed valuable for nihilist thought? The real world tuning into a fable must be accompanied by the dissipation of the Cartesian subject (in his *The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera opposes his spirit of the novel precisely to the philosophy of Descartes as the shaper of the modern concept of subjectivity, Kundera 2000: 6). To hold fast to a single story, a single reality, such as the iron cage of common sense or religion, leads to fanaticism, where truth again strives towards stronger validity in the form of correspondence. I propose to support existential pluralism, a schizophrenic oscillation between different fables! One of the more relevant characteristics of the text of pleasure is its capacity to draw the readers in, to make them forget that “I read, therefore I am”.

For the subject nestling in a singular basic discourse, the acceptance of nihilism is, I suppose, too traumatic an experience. Nietzsche believed that man as such (i.e. a subject) perishes in nihilism; by Vattimo’s interpretation, Nietzsche’s overman

indicates the disruption of consciousness, the *hybris* of experimenting with oneself, the delight from nonsense (Vattimo 1986: 51, 63). Certainly there is grave danger in changing masks, since „each jargon (each fiction) fights for hegemony” (Barthes 1975: 28). There is a danger of becoming locked up somewhere, and if it does not happen to be a generally established story for the society, you will be declared insane. Nevertheless, the greatest threat to nihilist thought turns out to be the dominant fable of common sense that, through the production of power, entices and captivates, offers a secure footing in the chaos of fables, and thereby keeps re-creating subjectivity.

Treating the real as fabulated does not force one to a necessity of choosing between a complete acceptance of one single narrative (à la the madness of Don Quixote), and a schizophrenic oscillation between different narratives, where every fable is taken, while one lingers in it, utterly seriously as the sole reality (à la Jekyll and Hyde). The acceptance of nihilism as weak thinking signifies a weakened intensity in experiencing reality, a hesitatingly critical distance from everything – the ethics of dissemination, as John Caputo has called it (Caputo 1987: 235ff). We switch fables like masks in a costume store, with no hope of finding the real face. In describing this sort of existence, Vattimo has highlighted a passage of text in Nietzsche, the content of which is knowledge that I am sleeping, but that I must go on sleeping in order to avoid losing my life (Vattimo 1989: 17):

I have *discovered* for myself that the ancient humanity and animality, indeed the whole prehistory and past of all sentient being,

continues within me to fabulate, to love, to hate, and to infer – I suddenly awoke in the middle of this dream, but only to the consciousness that I am dreaming and that I *must* go on dreaming lest I perish – as the sleepwalker has to go on dreaming in order to avoid falling down (Nietzsche 2001: 63).

Let us summarise the prior analysis by highlighting the different ways of cognizing the fable and associating them, if possible, with philosophical positions.

1. Treating one fable as the sole truth. Monotheism, metaphysics, scientific realism. This disposition may also be naive, theoretically un-reflected. Persons occupying this position do not, naturally enough, agree to consider their story as a fable, a tall tale. This belief is necessarily associated with a belief in an extra-linguistic reality. By and large, this disposition leads to the desire to exclude or repress the believers of other fables. If the fable that previously formed the foundation for cognition happens to lose its cogency, the person turns to the exact opposite extreme: everything is futile!
2. Acknowledging contingency that there are many possible fables. Cultural relativism, pragmatism. This disposition acknowledges, on the philosophical level, the impossibility of demonstrating the objectivity of any one metanarrative, but adds the common sense notion that in everyday life, believing in some fable or other is cognitively necessary (e.g. Rorty's ironic liberal). By developing this disposition to the extreme, we reach radical scepticism.
3. Tragic oscillation between different fables, schizophrenia. In cultures where

holding on to a single fable is the norm, this condition is treated as a pathology; people consider such oscillations to be a problem and attempt to hold on to one single fable. Many literary works are based on this kind of tragedy, e.g. *The Magus* by John Fowles, *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis.

4. Affirmation of the oscillation between fables, nihilism's weak thinking. This approach conjoins the previous two ways of cognizing fables, approves of the alternation of fables, but retains an ironic distance. Ontological earnestness is replaced by aesthetic experience.

2nd line of thought – naming the nothing

Although treating reality and the fable as identical seems mad enough for a worldview based on natural sciences, the above line of thought is not by far the most radical strand nihilist thought. In my assessment, the fable is part and parcel of early nihilist thought, as it retains a certain meaningful whole, a world (even if it is a simulacrum). Writing out the fable remains connected to truth, and it is this connection that hermeneutics leans on, Vattimo included.

But nihilist thought strives to go even further. According to Derrida, "... we still *have trouble* defining the question of literature, dissociating it from the question of truth, from the essence of language, from essence itself" (Derrida 1992: 48). This kind of writing would not limit itself with the free play of fabulation, but moves towards truth-less writing. It is an extreme that in Heidegger's terminology can be characterised in this manner: the decay

of literary works, together with which the world set up by the work also decays, and the Earth (*Erde*) as an interpretive residue is allowed to speak (Vattimo 2008: 157). It is a question about the possibility of the mystical function of language, Blanchot's second slope of literature (Blanchot 1999b: 386). To be sure, content is not enough for this style of writing, form must decay as well.

This direction can be interpreted in the spirit of traditional mysticism, according to which the purpose is to apprehend, in the silence of poetry, the untouched nature of things before the violence of naming (Critchley 2002: 64). It is my position that nihilist thought is not reducible to such positivity. In this next part of the essay, I will examine the question: how does the fusion of the thought of philosophy/literature move to the very heart of nihilism – how to say no, naught, nothing?

The question is truly paradoxical; despite this, many (post)modern poets-thinkers have tried to grapple with it. I do not intend to claim that some writers or philosophers have succeeded in expressing pure nothingness, or that the fusion of philosophy and literature provides us with methodological tools for carrying out such an explication in the future. Thinking the nothing must remain a paradox, a possibility of impossibility. But it is precisely along this line that the fusion of literature and philosophy reaches its farthest point, the extremity of self-disintegration. On the one hand, introducing into thought the ontological layer of nihilism, the not-ing nothing, in order to sketch out more clearly the orientation of contemporary literature towards meaninglessness, which un-

der an ontic stare seems but a mere revolt, weakness, or an idle play of forms. On the other hand, thinking the nothing requires artistic language, metaphors, and not rigid propositions. It should be emphasized at this point that we are not dealing here with an attempt at metaphysical flanking whose (secret) goal is to define the nothing. With respect to the status of the nothing itself, we must take up the position of *epoche* characteristic of art more generally (Gadamer 1993: 234); there is no guarantee that we are dealing with a real phenomenon, nor is there any assurance of the origin of the nothing in abstraction.

In what follows, I will sketch out some notes on this topic that have no pretence of being exhaustive.

The Nothing: The sublime object of postmodernity

Our present topic – naming the nothing – can, in my opinion, be characterised by an application of Lyotard's conception of the sublime. Whereas the hermeneutic approach puts its stake in the *beauty* of the work (Gadamer 1990: 481-488), which is relevant for the trueness that opens up the world of the work, the sublime approach is connected with the closed, the inexpressible, which roams the pathos of the work without ever reaching the open.

In his programmatic paper 'Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism', Lyotard establishes a connection between modern art („lack of reality“) and Nietzsche's nihilism (Lyotard 1984: 77). Drawing on Kant, Lyotard argues that the sublime is a dual sentiment that covers both pleasure and suffering. The sub-

lime arises „when the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept” (ibid: 78). An example would be the concept of “the world” – the totality of everything that exists, or the absolute, etc. (ibid). Thus the sublime is created by the unrepresentable.

The peculiarity of modern art indeed lies in the fact that it does not represent something that exists, nor does it create a new world, but rather focuses on *presenting the unrepresentable* (ibid: 77). A modern work of art – including literary works – demonstrates through itself, that a work is not self-contained, that there is something absent in it that cannot be made visible (e.g. Proust’s lost time). This unrepresentable only makes itself visible by making it impossible to see (ibid: 77). I would like to rephrase Lyotard’s lines of thinking for the present context: for sublime works of art, the nothing is added to the content of the work. And it is no mere appendage, but an addition that, without being itself revealed, dislocates the work, and gives rise to uncomfortable doubt. The nothing is not one sublime concept among others, but rather the “substance” of the unrepresentable as such².

² Rodolphe Gasché (2001) has written about the necessity for an ontological reading of Lyotard’s conception of the sublime. In the paper, Gasché provides an interpretation of Lyotard’s *Inhuman* and *The Differend* and concludes that Lyotard’s concept of the sublime „must abandon esthetic categories in favor of ontological ones“ (Gasché 2001: 127–128). According to Gasché’s analysis, in the concept of the sublime there is an intermingling of the astonishment that something appears (as pure appropriation, *Ereignis*) and the anxiety deriving from the threat of the nothing that „The impossible, nothingness would be possible“ (Lyotard 1988: 79). In the unrepresentable that gives rise to the sublime, there is included the possibility of non-Being as the final phrase (cf. Gasché 2001: 121–122).

How to present the unrepresentable? For Lyotard, it is indeed from the answer to this question that the difference between modernism and postmodernism derives.

“... modern aesthetics is an aesthetics of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because if its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure.” (ibid: 81)

As an example of a modern work, Lyotard presents the writings of Proust. The strategy of a postmodern work, to the contrary, is to seek for the unrepresentable in the very form of presentation itself, from the refusal of the obligation to follow known forms (ibid: 81).

„A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules...” (ibid: 81)

As an example of postmodern art, Lyotard proposes Joyce, who crosses the frontiers of known language and meaning, and undermines language itself. It is this very same activity of undermining that many interpreters have considered to be the key to understanding the works of Beckett, as well (Glicksberg 1975, Weller 2005).

Thus it can be said that in postmodern writing, the pleasure of the text, the eminence of the work which Gadamer (1985: 250) emphasizes will disappear. The unrepresentable appears as the dissolution of known forms; there is, in literature, a disruption, a critical turning into itself (Derriida 1992: 41). A literary work no longer describes what is external to it, but rather language itself; the work turns in on itself.

If literature does happen to speak of something other than itself, it does this only incidentally. According to Derrida, the pure self-containment of a literary work is a true challenge, but it is doubtful if it will ever be met:

„ ... a literature that talked only about literature or a work that was purely self-referential would immediately be annulled. You'll say that that's maybe what's happening. In which case it is this experience of the nothing-ing of nothing that interests our desire under the name of literature” (Derrida 1992: 47).

A similar turning into itself, together with an emphasis on the unrepresentable (a refusal of foundational statements) can be discovered, in addition to literature, in post-metaphysical thought, traditionally classified as philosophy or essay writing, e.g. in the writings of Derrida or Blanchot.

Postmodernity is an important fingerpost in Vattimo's thought as well, whose thinking has been a constant presence throughout this paper. According to Vattimo, the primary significance of postmodernity is the post-metaphysical, weakening thought that no longer seeks for any foundations (cf. Vattimo 1994: 164–181). For him, the founder of postmodern philosophy is Nietzsche (ibid), but Vattimo's own ontology of decline is well characterized by the concept of postmodernity, as well.

For quite some time now, I've been gnawed by a doubt that there is something significant missing from Vattimo's theory/narrative. Vattimo's treatment of the post-metaphysical world of fables nevertheless remains a story, a narrative. The content of

this story is indeed far from foundationalism, as it accepts the paradox of grounding-ungrounding, but the certitude by which Vattimo develops his theory, the *form* of his essays, speaks a different language. Several critics (Antiseri 1996) have been doubtful of the weakness of Vattimo's own thought. Vattimo's hermeneutic essays are brilliant formal wholes that are always directed towards understanding, and secretly comprise, by their persuasive rhetoric, a network of metanarratives. Vattimo never reaches the self-subverting multiplicity of fragmentary writing so characteristic of Nietzsche (Blanchot 1993: 151–170).

Vattimo is not particularly interested in the inexpressible, in the nothing. In his theory, Being/nothingness is comfortably reduced into a trace present in the existing, the mystical element of thought has been eliminated, and the inexpressible bears but hermeneutic evidence of the limits of human thought. For Vattimo, every engagement with the inexpressible has a taste of foundationalism to it, the desire to present mystical perfection (cf. e.g. Vattimo's criticism of Derrida, Vattimo 1993). The ontological difference remains, for him, but a cursory springboard for jumping into the more practical topic of how to go on living in the world of nihilism (Vattimo 2004).

I would argue that the dual regime of substantiation/failure developed by Vattimo can be fruitfully applied in discussions of nothingness³. Avoiding the nothing is

³ Rita Šerpytytė suggests an interesting interpretation according to which avoiding the discussion over nothingness is only a surface followed from the metaphysical thinking. In fact, nothingness is the central point of weak thought (Šerpytytė 2005: 115).

not an obligatory element of hermeneutic thought; even Gadamer, who distanced himself from Heidegger's radical distinction between Being/nothingness, considered it necessary to discuss encounters with the nothing in poetry (Gadamer 1993: 239) and the essential similarity between philosophy and poetry through a connection with the inexpressible (ibid: 236). Philosophy/literature does not contend itself with the beauty of presenting the world (the fable), it also covers the sublime in the inexplicability of nothingness, the sublime failure of language.

The Topos of Nihilism: The space of the literary

The most consistent writer that I am aware of who writes on the topic of the failure of language is the poet-philosopher Maurice Blanchot. Unlike Lyotard, Blanchot does not make use of the concept of the sublime; nevertheless, it is in fact just this radical direction that literature has taken towards the unrepresentable as described by Lyotard that is present in Blanchot's essays. In his essay *The Space of Literature* Blanchot describes literature as the severing of this link that connects one with the world, as taking language out of the world (Blanchot 1982: 26). The writer belongs to language that no-one speaks, that is addressed at nobody, that has no centre and that reveals nothing (ibid: 26). The language of the poem is unreal and art is the silence of the world (ibid: 47).

From Blanchot's declarations we can decipher a radical change in the form of literature, the demand for the destruction of description (through the silence of the

world and truth) as well as the pursuit of the acommunicativity of language. This pursuit is the inverse of the pursuit of hermeneutics, where being understood is regarded as the intention of every utterance. According to Foucault, Blanchot's works are about the externality of thought, they are thoughts about language that flees from being discourse and reaches as far away from itself as possible (Foucault 1990: 12). In all of his works, Blanchot strives to develop impossibility, paradox, the task "To write without writing, to bring literature to that point of absence where it disappears, where we no longer have to fear its secrets which are lies, that is 'writing degree zero', the neutrality which every writer deliberately or unwittingly seeks, and which leads some to silence" (Blanchot 1995: 147–148) Blanchot's text vibrates in the interspaces between writing and non-writing, having a dialogue with other (non-)writers, such as Mallarme and Kafka.

On the basis of the paper *Literature and Right to Death* we can see that Blanchot is not a fanatical mystic who would consider as possible the arrival of *poesie pure*. Literature fluctuates between two slopes without ever veering completely to one side (Blanchot 1999b: 388). The literary space described by Blanchot is the other slope of literature besides the fable.

Nevertheless, Blanchot's parlance is not the only one that closely brushes the nothing. Writing that refuses a coherent whole that we are currently prying, overlaps with the *text of pleasure* described by Barthes in his famous *The Pleasure of the Text*.

„Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language“ (Barthes 1975: 14).

Barthes asks: „How can text, which consists of language, be outside languages? <...> How can the text “get itself out” of the war of fictions, of sociolects?” (ibid: 30). And he answers:

„– by a gradual labour of extenuation. First, the text liquidates all metalanguage, whereby it is text: no voice (Science, Cause, Institution) is behind what it is saying. Next the text destroys utterly, to the point of contradiction, its own discursive category, its sociolinguistic reference (its „genre“) <...> Lastly, the text can, if it wants, attack the canonical structures of the language itself (Sollers): lexicon <...> syntax (ibid: 30–31).

Barthes adds that through such a transformation, the new philosophical condition of the matter of language as outside of its own origin and outside communication is revealed, which indeed amounts to language use in its keenest form. Wrecking communicability at sentence level – that is the artistic device for both Dadaism and absurdist drama. Another example would be the intermingling of words with graphical signs in contemporary poetry (McHale 1987: 185–188) as well as in thought, e.g. Heidegger’s ~~Sein~~ Heidegger 1978: 405), Blanchot’s \pm (Blanchot 1993: 151–170). As the end of the above quote by Barthes indicates, the text of pleasure may not even balk at dismantling the very structures of language itself – since language implies metaphysics (Blanchot 1993: 166); and according to Nietzsche, as long as we be-

lieve in grammar, we are incapable of freeing ourselves from God (Nietzsche 1988, vol. 6: 78), nor to develop further the nihilist thought that commences at the death of God. At the same time, however, one must take caution, when the text is progressively extenuated, not to fall into the metaphysical trap of overcoming, of reaching the other side. This extenuation of text should be understood as an endless process that constantly shifts between structure and silence.

As it proceeds from the fusion of philosophy and literature, the description of the text of pleasure does not limit itself to *literary* texts as they are distinguished institutionally. And indeed: the texts of both Blanchot and the latter Barthes are, for me at least, just as much texts of pleasure as, say, the works of Beckett. *The Space of Literature* and *The Pleasure of the Text* do not speak for anything, nor are they connected to any one meta-language (as, for example, Heidegger speaking in the name of Being or hermeneutics in the name of understanding); both of these texts are a galaxy away from the scientific, and only innocent declarations remain.

According to Critchley (2002: 51), for Blanchot, the origin of the work of art is betrayal, failure, the scattering of the work in worklessness. Blanchot’s space of literature can indeed be regarded as the *topos* of nihilism, as the place where **not-ness** emerges.

Anxiety, boredom and the nothing

Next, let us observe two figures around which the text of pleasure comes into being – anxiety and boredom. In his 1929

lecture, *What is metaphysics* (Heidegger 1978: 103–121), Heidegger describes the direct experience of nothingness as a phenomenon in anxiety (*Angst*). Unlike fear (*Fürcht*), anxiety lacks an object, it is innately indefinable. The ensemble of beings shifts aside and we will have no hold on things and only the no (*kein*) remains (Heidegger 1978: 111). Access to nothingness in anxiety is, for Heidegger, at the same time access to Being, since Being and nothingness are, for him, one and the same (Heidegger 1977: 85ff). *Dasein* is characterised by being held out into the nothing (Heidegger 1978: 114).

In his paper ‘Nothing to be said’, Shane Weller makes an interesting observation. In the *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger discusses the truthful experience of nothingness in poetry, with reference to Knut Hamsun (Heidegger 1987: 27). Heidegger, however, does not associate anxiety, which opens up nothingness, with literature (Weller 2003: 97). The reason for the absence of this connection is revealed by reading the lecture ‘What is metaphysics?’: the anxiety that opens up nothingness leaves us, according to Heidegger, mute, and places us into empty silence (Heidegger 1978: 111). There are no utterances or writing in anxiety, and thus no poetry can be created.

This anxiety that wipes away all being makes utterances impossible. Even so, in his essay ‘From Dread to Language’⁴, Blanchot brings up just this impossibil-

ity. According to Blanchot, the writer is, paradoxically, located precisely in anxiety: there are no words here, there is nothing to write, but anxiety is nevertheless always accompanied by an extreme compulsion to write (Blanchot 1999a: 345). To write means to write nothing, all words are fingerposts around emptiness. Nothingness is the writer’s subject matter and he is himself reduced into the nothing (ibid: 345). Yet the writer’s situation is paradoxical: he does not fall silent but keeps on writing, and with this he preserves the connection with discourse, an authority over language, which he can never despatch completely (ibid: 346). The nothing lurking in anxiety manifests itself as verbosity (ibid: 347); it is impossible to remain silent. The writer does indeed attempt to abolish what he has written and himself as well (as writing harbours deep links with death), but this can never be completely successful. What would an ultimate meaninglessness be? Blanchot asks. Is it the work where the possibility of reading is excluded, the work-as-death-trap? (ibid: 350). In any case, it does not help if the author destroys his works immediately after creating them, because he himself has already read them. What is needed is that the work would be destroyed immediately after being created, together with the writer’s memory (ibid: 351). An important step on the path to non-writing could perhaps be the dissolution of language into random strings of signs, even though Derrida would argue here that context specificity would in any case add significance to any given text. If, for example, a famous writer would publish a text filled with meaningless strings

⁴ In references to this particular essay, Weller uses the concept of Anguish. In the translation that I made use of, the primary concept is Dread. Both concepts translate Heidegger’s *Angst*.

of signs, the very act of publication would immediately place it into a sphere of significance, and the critics would attempt to “decode” it.

Writing cannot thus be analysed rationally, there is no solution to the paradox. For Blanchot, anxiety will always remain an enigma for the writer, and there can be no explanation for the enigma, for otherwise it would dissipate (Blanchot 1999a: 352). Yet one can still focus on the enigma, to write the impossibility of writing in anxiety. Several thinkers have noted that it was Samuel Beckett who reached the farthest towards disintegrating language, towards uttering the nothing. Weller, too, presents his most detailed analysis about Beckett, who is situated in the no-man’s-land between the borders of being and nothingness (Weller 2003: 95, with reference to Adorno). As an example of uttering the nothing, Weller puts forward Beckett’s *The Unnamable* and argues that this curious relationship between language and nothingness is carried on to Beckett’s late work *Worstward Ho* (ibid: 103). In this novella, there is an impossible transformation from the bad to the worse – impossible because what can be said can never be the worst. The story enacts a complete failure, the failure of nihilism itself (ibid: 105).

Mark D. Seem coins the concept of *anti-literature*, which engages well with the present mesh of concepts about the space of literature or the text of pleasure. Anti-literature is opposed to literature as a system of qualifications by which the author represents the truth (Seem 1994: 17). Seem emphasizes the repetition of difference, literary machines (ibid: 18). His train

of thought goes back to Deleuze, to the necessity of arriving, in literature, at endless repetition, where repetition itself is repeated (ibid: 21). As a lengthier example, the author presents Proust, but notes that this type of writing goes back to de Sade. De Sade’s text operates in the everlasting chain of boredom, where the exact same events are repeated to tedium, without any change in sight (*The 120 Days of Sodom*).

While the previous analysis seemed to indicate that de Sade’s writings are located on the first slope of literature, in the extreme freedom of fabulation, acknowledging the **not-ing** aspect of boredom casts de Sade in a new light. De Sade does not unsettle the canonical forms of language, but instead keeps spinning the same endless line of perversions. Going along with this nonsense may perhaps, similar to anxiety, shift the entirety of being away from before us.

True enough, according to Heidegger’s lecture *What is Metaphysics?*, boredom is a sort of mood (*Stimmung*) that, pushed to the extreme, does indeed reveals *beings* as a whole (Heidegger 1978: 110); nevertheless, immediate access to Being is only provided by anxiety. It should, however, be taken into account that this lecture is part of the fundamental-ontological period of his thought, borne of the ambition to make Being/nothingness explicit. After *the turn* this ambition wanes.

To be sure, the possible role that boredom can play in nihilist thought should be developed further; here we have space but for two broad allusions. First, one should contemplate the similarity between Heidegger’s total objectless boredom (*es*

ist einem langweilig) and Blanchot's neutrality of writing, writing at the zero point (Blanchot 1995). Second, I would like to highlight a passage from Bigelow's paper 'The Ontology of Boredom', where the author argues, on the basis of Heidegger and Kierkegaard, that boredom lacks an essence and adds: "in the indifference of boredom, nothing matters, not even the nothing" (Bigelow 1983: 260). This may point to a road to naming the nothing: if focussing on the nothing imprisons thought into a metaphysical trap by trying to objectify the not, then total subject-less boredom may in fact turn out to be a chance for nihilist thought.

Not just the fable's power to change, but also language extracted from the world of the text of pleasure sets subjectivity adrift, makes existence problematic. This last line of thought is more radical than the first, since here it is not the concrete being-someone that is undermined, but being altogether.

By way of a conclusion

This rumination that is about to come to an end provided a muddled outline of the space of possibilities for literature fusing with philosophy, without having any pretence of providing an exhaustive list of the possibilities of uttering the nothing. The relation of literature to death remained unanalysed, and the phenomenon of silence ought to also be paid separate attention.

Over the course of these deliberations, I arrived at the conclusion that the weakening nihilism must relinquish the pursuit of

scientificity and fade into the literary. Yet, as I showed above, thought fusing with literature does not amount to copying a pre-existing reality, but rather to the creation of fables as realities, that is, worlds (*poiesis*). The other possible route for literature is to erode the wholeness of meaning, to head towards *poesie pure*, to name the truth-less nothing.

Uttering the nothing can never be direct, the nothing cannot be revealed in the *logos* of the text, but remains roaming inexpressibly in the pathos of the text. Thought that struggles to name the nothing can only be realized in metaphors and in perplexity – and it is for this reason that this way of thinking requires the means of literature.

When it comes to the fusion of philosophy/literature, I consider it to be most relevant to focus on the inexpressible. This thought gropes towards language extracted from the world, and renounces truth and meaning. Such an outlook is frightening, and thus different interpretations attempt to graft on indirect meanings to thinking about the nothing (mystical unity, negative theology, etc.). But the unity of philosophy/nihilism means the acceptance nihilism without a nostalgic expectation of overcoming it. Forsaking meaning is not done in the name of something, literature here functions as a pure self-undermining gift or present. In this thinking, the nothing is not an objective but a sublime metaphor.

As long as utterances continue, however, foregoing significance cannot take a radical turn. There is thus a two-fold tension in nihilist thought: on the one hand it

manifests itself in the oscillation between the above two lines of thought, between the two slopes of literature. On the other hand, there is a continued tension between nihilist thought and the metaphysics that preceded it – in the form of a trace, metaphysics remains forever within nihilism. The fusion of philosophy and literature is not a process of overcoming difference that simply takes awhile; rather, nihilist thought operates in an everlasting process of fusion.

The elemental tendency of post-metaphysical thought is to enter into the space of literature, into language extracted from the world. Over the course of the fusion with literature, philosophy is freed from the uneasiness that has been generated ever since late 19th century by the fact that, compared to science, philosophy is useless. Philosophy/literature no longer turns out to be useless, but rather becomes useless in principle, self-undermining, everlasting in its own impossibility.

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It is just in this kind of completely useless nonsense that thought lets go of metaphysical foundationalism, takes a leap from the ground to the abyss, to where there is no propositional discourse at all, but only free flow, play (Caputo 1987: 224). But this leap does not lead thought into the depths of the nothing as if to a home, but rather abandons it in order to drift forever between Being-nothingness. The ontology of decline has nothing to tell us, but it can be a guide to the aesthetics of declination.

As if betraying the title, my paper formally consisted mostly of argumentative lines of thought rather than poetry, but poetry should have the final word:

Out, out, brief candle!
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
 And then is heard no more: it is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing.

Shakespeare. *Macbeth*

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FILOSOFIJA IR LITERATŪRA: DVI SUSILIEJIMO KRYPTYS

Leo Luks

S a n t r a u k a

Straipsnyje „Filosofijos ir literatūros susiliejimas nihilistiniame mąstyme“ (Problemos 2010, 77) rašiau, kad postmetafizinė filosofija turėtų suintensyvinti dialogą su literatūra ir galų gale su ja susilieti. Šiame straipsnyje siūlomos dvi galimos šio susiliejimo kryptys:

- 1) ribų tarp realybės ir išmonės išnykimas. Kartu su G. Vattimo atsakę korespondentinės tiesos teorijos, prieisime prie išvados apie principinę galimybę bet kuriam naratyvui būti teisingam (angl. *truthful*). Nihilistiniam mąstymui būdingas silpnėjęs realybės jausmas, skeptiškas požiūris į sveiko proto ar natūralistinę poziciją. Tokia situacija, aprašyta Nietzsche's, skirtą tarp realaus

pasaulio ir net neįtikėtinų pasakų daro iš principo neįmanomą. Iš to plaukia keletas toli siekiančių epistemologinių ir etinių konsekvencijų.

- 2) Susiliedama su literatūra, nihilistinė filosofija ieško kalbos, galinčios artikuliuoti niekį, reprezentuoti tai, kas nereprezentuojama. Straipsnyje šis siekis analizuojamas pasitelkiant postmoderno diskurso sąvokas – literatūros erdvė, nerimas. Remiamasi Maurice Blanchot, Rolando Barthe'o ir Jeano-François Lyotard'o kūriniais. Susiliedama su literatūra nihilistinė filosofija gali gyvuoti ir neturėdama ką pasakyti.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: nihilizmas, hermeneutika, pramanytumai, niekis, postmodernus.

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