

The Unbearable
Lightness of Being Nothing:
Einmal ist Keinmal in Otto
And Nietzsche

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Abstract: Using void as a starting point this article provides an Ottonian and Nietzschean reading of ‘nothingness.’ Nietzsche’s *Dionysian Worldview* describes the path laid out by “saint and tragic artist” while Otto’s *Das Heilige* provides the parallel path of mystic and artist. Both cases lead to a discourse on emptiness and no-thingness. These categorical types (mystic/saint and artist) are localized through mystic St. Faustina Kowalska and minimalist sculptor Fred Sandback. Where Faustina *interiorizes* an abyss of nothingness, Sandback *exteriorizes* nothingness in his artwork. Her hidden, spiritualized void is paralleled in his exposed aesthetic display. An analysis of each reveals the ways in which Nietzsche and Otto engage with nothingness, respectively affirming and denying the sentiment that *einmal ist keinmal* (once is not enough).

Nothing

Nothing is no-thing; it is the void of non-existence. Encountering this void stirs an awareness of our temporal, transient nature or human condition. In an Ottonian Christian existentialism this tension drives us towards faith, God and ultimately resolution through eternal salvation. In a Nietzschean atheistic existentialism our mortality is an inner contradiction incapable of finding transcendent resolution. Otto and Nietzsche offer variant responses to the void, as do Christians and atheists respectively.

The former encourages theistic faith unto salvation, while the latter leads us into tragic clarity and absurdity. These alternatives can be explored using the phrase *Einmal ist keinmal*. Translated, it means that “once is not enough” often taken to mean that once is not enough in life. We cannot find satisfaction in the absurd limitations of brevity. Our transiency renders our existence tragic and pointless in Nietzsche, and a condition for salvation in Otto.

In addressing nothingness Nietzsche has laid out the path of “saint and tragic artist” (1997: 91). He uses Apollonian and Dionysian aesthetics to engage with their no-thingness. For Nietzsche art can always be understood in the context of Apollonian form and Dionysian formlessness; combined their aesthetic justifies the very existence of the world (1967: 5). Otto mirrors a *mystic* and artist, understanding no-thing in the context of the numinous. The numinous is holiness, void of all rational and moral character. It is received in consciousness as mysterious and tremendous, drawing one towards salvation. These categorical figures of mystic/saint and artist are localized in Polish mystic St. Faustina Kowalska and American minimalist sculpture Fred Sandback. This article begins with the void of St. Faustina and Fred Sandback, before moving on to an Ottonian and Nietzschean analysis, finally ending with an overall opposing dynamism.

Saint Faustina: Interior No-thing

Apophatic Christian mysticism is steeped in emptiness, nothingness and void. These conditions produce psychological states of absolute negation where the mind is emptied of objects, images, distinctions and any sense of self. This process culminates in ‘pure consciousness’ or ‘undifferentiated reality’ for the mystic (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2011). Contemporary mysticism scholar Bernard McGinn (2008: 75-76) suggests three apophatic stages: negation of language, annihilation of the created will and abandonment by God. St. Faustina experienced all three cumulative stages, finding deeper levels of negation in each.

At great depth language collapses such that mystics must creatively convey their experiences. This leads to paradoxical, analogous or metaphorical descriptions. Faustina explains that she was “swallowed up as the heat of the sun swallows up a drop of dew” and then alternately “drown[ed] like a single grain of sand in a bottomless ocean” of God (2003: 334). More than embodying a drop of dew or grain of sand, Faustina is inviting us to imagine the vast impossibility of her experiences. This early stage of negation deals exclusively with language, while still preserving multifarious forms of creative expression.

At the next level, mystics engage with nothingness through annihilation of self. This is not a rapturous union with God; this is the searing immolation of self. Meister Eckhart has called this a state of *entwerden* or unbecoming (Otto, 1923: 114). This unbecoming empties the individual of their very existence such that they have *become* void. Faustina describes herself as an “abyss of nothingness” such that she could “return to nothingness in a moment” (2003: 256). She remains in the abyss during the third and final stage of negation. Abandonment by God has commonly been experienced during the “dark night of the soul.” Although the experiences vary, the same intense feelings of abandonment are clear. Faustina poetically articulates her own trials of abandonment as a *horrible night*. She was overwhelmed by complete abandonment by God and was left defenseless against feelings of extreme hopelessness. Faustina had always sought out comfort from God; without him she had no consolation. She describes herself as falling “deeper and deeper from darkness to darkness,” even approaching a state where the soul “dies and withers” (101). However it is a “death without death, that is to say, it cannot die” (101). Despite the intensity of suffering and longing for death, there is no relief to be had. God does not immediately return, and does not comfort her. This most torturous stage typically leads to closer union with God, as it eventually did in Faustina. These three stages of negation illuminate the trials of St. Faustina. The second stage is most pertinent as she loses herself in an abyss of darkness and nothingness. Faustina’s interior struggles are physically manifest in the work of Sandback who articulates nothingness through art.

Fred Sandback: Exterior No-thing

Minimalism is an expression of the fundamental features of art. Aside from its scant material presence, it can be recognized by its sharp lines, geometric shapes, repetition, neutrality and use of industrial mediums. Art critic Rosalind Krauss defines minimalism as “a reduction of art to the point of emptiness” where “minimalist sculptors, in both their choice of materials and their method of assembling them . . . [are] intent to deny the interiority of sculpted form, or at least repudiate the interior of forms as a source of their significance” (1993: 262). The inside of artwork, previously thought to conceal secrets, has been thrown open. Not a thing is withheld, all is on display. The transparent nature of the art is made evident in the clarity of its exposed form. Minimalism is brought to a startling level of nothingness in the work of Fred Sandback.

Sandback studied philosophy and then sculpture at Yale University with minimalist artists Robert Morris and Donald Judd. During this time he absorbed minimalist trends and set about making artwork out of—and about—nothing. The first sculpture Sandback attempted was a rectangle made of string and wire which alluded to an empty rectangular solid. He explains “It opened up a lot of possibilities . . . I could assert a certain place or volume in its full materiality without occupying and obscuring it” (1986: 12). Those artistic possibilities were realized in two decades of work. Their sheer nothingness horrified and intrigued his audience by both existing and simultaneously not existing.

Using lengths of colored yarn, tautly pulled from ceiling to floor, Sandback created striking geometric configurations in empty space. He materialized empty planes and doorways, each alluding to forms that did not quite exist, relying instead on patrons’ imaginations. He stressed the ‘inherent transiency’ of his art, which is made and re-made as it is assembled and disassembled. In horrifying clarity, nothingness was made palpable. Mark Taylor remarked of Sandback’s work, “While lines frame planes, which are nothing, planes in turn, interact without intersecting to create volumes out of voids” and

“repeatedly returns to this question of nothingness” (1999: 207-210). This was intentional. Sandback confessed to wanting to create art without an inside (1986: 12-19). More than denying the interiority of his work he wanted to deny its very *materiality* and stretch its tenuous existence. He explains, “it allow[s] me to play with something both existing and not existing at the same time” (12-19). The existence of his art was balanced, as it were, on the edge of a string.

Otto’s Numinous as *mysterium tremendum* in a Mystic and Artist

Rudolf Otto’s *numinous* connects the nothingness of the mystic and artist. The numinous is holiness void of all rational and moral factors and is characterized by the diametric concept *mysterium tremendum*. The *mysterium* is perceived as *wholly other* from anything we have encountered and attractive, compelling, fascinating. The *tremendum* is awful, overpowering, uncanny, and urgent (Dawson, 1989: 307). These two terms exist in a dynamic tension, as simultaneously attracting and repelling for the believer. Aspects of the *tremendum* have been uniquely expressed in Goethe and Nietzsche. Otto remarks of Goethe’s *ungeheurer* that it is monstrously huge and “too overwhelming for our space perception to register” or alternately it is the “uncanny, fearful, incomprehensible” (1923: 40). It is also Nietzsche’s *unheimliche*, the unknown, unfamiliar and perhaps the concealed. Through Otto these varied conceptions come together as the numinous, expanded through the mystic and artist below.

Mystic

Bernard McGinn’s three stages of mystic negation, exemplified in St. Faustina, resonate with Otto’s numinous. Each is considered in turn. According to Otto (1923: 101) mystics negate language in order to convey their non-conceptual, non-rational

experiences of the wholly other. Language breaks down such that paradox becomes indispensable. Otto explains, “exaggerated to the point of paradox this [mystic] negation and contrast [are] the only means open to conceptual thought to apprehend the *mysterium*” (29). Additionally, paradox is an essential, distinguishing feature of God, adding great depth to Christianity as a whole (59).

At the next level mystics engage with nothingness through annihilation of self. Otto frames this as a consequence of the overpowering *tremendum*. Diminished relative to the great absolute the mystic feels that they are naught but “dust and ashes and nothingness” (20). This often leads them to utter the phrase “I am naught, thou art all” (21).

The final stage of feeling abandoned by God is also a consequence of the *tremendum* and articulated in combination with the previous two states.

Yet although the *tremendum* element is subdued [in Western Christianity], it is not entirely lacking. It remains a living factor in the . . . *altum silentium* in the ‘abyss’ the ‘night’ . . . into which the soul must descend in the ‘agony,’ ‘abandonment,’ ‘barrenness,’ in the shuddering and shrinking in the loss and deprivation of selfhood and the ‘annihilation’ of personal identity (105).

The mystic encounters the *mysterium* and then the *tremendum* as it progresses through the three stages of negation. The negation of language is a consequence of the wholly other nature of *mysterium*, necessitating the creative use of paradox. The loss of identity comes in the face of overpoweringness from the *tremendum*. Finally, abandonment by God results in the shuddering, shrinking, and fearful element of *tremendum*’s awe-fulness.

Artist

The numinous is additionally exemplified in the no-thingness of artwork. Rationality gives way to intuitive, creative modalities of art as the sublime is broached, pushing us into the numinous. For Otto, art is “the most effective means of representing the sublime” especially in darkness, silence or emptiness (Otto, 1923: 69). Although the sublime is often an indirect means of approaching the numinous there are exceptions. On rare occasions we are brought into confrontation with the numinous. This occurs when the artist produces arresting, compelling or shocking artwork. It arouses an uncanny feeling, provoking us to “rise above what is mortal” (Poland, 1992: 176).

Sandback’s work is especially impressive. It localizes seemingly vast emptiness within the already bounded enclosure of the gallery space. He carefully wields the nothing inside of something (the gallery), forcing it to manifest itself in appalling clarity. The starkness of the emptiness is simple but also profound. This forced presentation can leave spectators aghast and compelled to engage. Patrons pass through the ephemeral gateways, step across planes, and are left wondering on which side of the nothing they stand. The pedestrian space of Sandback in fact encourages active participation. By delimiting the nothing around the nothing Sandback may create an eerie apprehension in his spectators who may approach and reach the numinous. The sculpted emptiness of Sandback unites aesthetic sublimity, localized in the numinous. Sandback’s sublime art transports us, by first freezing us in uncanny awe and then escorting us into numinosity.

Ultimately, the dread of the no-place haunts Faustina and Sandback, as tragic artist and mystic saint. Faustina explicitly locates the abyss of her soul as vacuous and gigantic. Sandback looks into the nothingness outside of us, and sees how it provokes a realization of the nothingness inside of us. It is an ever-present interiority where the incomprehensible is inescapable and, ultimately, must be confronted (Taylor, 1999: 217). We may all be haunted by what is old and familiar, intimately known to ourselves as self and also as unknown void.

The void exterior to Sandback is a material recreation of the immaterial abyss of St. Faustina, as tragic artist mirrors sanctified mystic. In both we come face to face with the numinous—at once frightening, compelling and awe-ful. At the same time it is eerily attractive, compelling and retains the positive quality of being wholly other.

Nietzsche's Dionysian and Apollonian Aesthetic in a Saint and Artist

From *The Birth of Tragedy* onwards, Nietzsche's aesthetic has centered on Greek gods Apollo and Dionysus. The God Apollo is a god of sculpted form; he stands as beautiful, insightful, moderate and wise. He is "the marvelous image of the *principium individuationis*," an individual in firm control of himself (Sedgwick, 2009: 5). Dionysus is rooted in "intoxication, rapture and the dissolution of ... the individual" (Nietzsche, 1997: 82). His is the artwork of music—powerful, fluid and overflowing. It is Apollo who intercedes to capture forms as they rush by, undifferentiated, in a Dionysian "stream" (145). These forms are dissolved in the rush of a Dionysian flow, re-formed again by Apollo. Chaos is managed, if not ordered, by Apollo in this dynamic balance of power. The power exerted by each god reflects the human phenomenon of *will to power*. Will to power is the insatiable drive to dominate. It is in fact the "essence of [human] life" finding fulfillment in mastery and control (Sedgwick, 2009: 153). Each individual attempts to exert their own insatiable will to power to attain mastery. This will to power is a never-ending quest to constantly overcome.

Saint

Faustina extends to an extreme point the universal struggle with limitation. Ultimately it is death that imposes limits on becoming, impresses our mortality onto us, and delimits our existence. In acknowledging the limits of death we acknowledge

the fragile temporality that defines us. Faustina is teetering on the edge of this form and formlessness expressed in her abyss. In recognizing formlessness differentiated identity is made all the more meaningful.

In Nietzschean terms, Faustina has control of her form in an Apollonian way: a quietly inspired self delimited by the boundaries of individuality. In encountering the abyss she is consumed in Dionysian intoxication, dissolving the boundaries of her limits. She feels herself to be melting away into nothingness, such that she no longer exists. She slips deeper and deeper into darkness, until her sense of self is swallowed up. Finally she is, “an abyss of nothingness and ... [could] return to nothingness in a moment” (Faustina, 2003: 256). She encounters the nothing of the abyss, and the nothingness she feels herself to be fading into. This nothingness is the Dionysian terror of existence, which Apollonian language both masks and reveals (Nietzsche, 1967: 123). The excess of Dionysus, as the terror of existence, is the extreme no-thing surrounding and eventually engulfing Faustina. Unlike Faustina, Nietzsche does not recognize the potential for salvation through God or any other form of fixed truth. Any fixed constructs, like God or truth, are illusory appearance and “illusory ornaments for nothingness” (Hatab, 1987: 95). Sacrificing self does not lead to greater celestial reward, but a keener discernment of the nothingness of life. Nietzsche explains, “When we sacrifice God, we have ‘unchained this earth from its sun . . . [and are] straying as through an infinite nothing’” (1968: 24). Understood in the words of Yeats ‘the centre cannot hold’ and so we are thrown into anarchy. Given this emphasis on nothingness, it is important to note that Nietzsche’s ‘infinite nothing’ does not lead into nihilism. Nietzschean scholar Lawrence Hatab explains that “in nihilism to say that all is false is to assume *that* truth as a fixed construct, that becomes certainty a ‘belief in unbelief’ and therefore [one will] ‘still have faith in truth’” (1987: 98-99). In Nietzsche the firm belief in the nothingness retains the quality of a belief in truth.

Hatab identifies Nietzsche’s use of negativity as an intrinsically valuable and essential feature of human nature

(102). Human beings, claimed Nietzsche, are in the “primal negativity of becoming” which necessarily entails finitude, temporality and non-substantiality. We all internalize this flux in the ‘positive-negative interplay’ required in all formations of meaning (100-103). Delimiting the boundaries of self with nothingness is a common feature of self-identity. Existentially, the self includes the breadth of what it is to be human, including passions, ambitions, fears, and anxieties—all in flux, confronting “change, limits and negative forces” (103). In attempting to fully understand individuals in a positive way, we destroy the inherent potentiality of unnamed nothingness. The uniqueness of individuality “eludes description in positive terms” (108). Hatab claims that being “pervaded by negativity does not threaten human meaning but articulates the way in which meaning is disclosed in the world, through tension of finitude [and in the]...midst of negativity” (103-104). It is a positive consequence of being human, and not merely reserved for mystical engagement. Faustina was literally confronted with a wholly otherness, manifesting itself all around her, engulfing her. It was this void that distinguished and delimited her form. Similarly we are all defining ourselves in the face of change, fluidity and non-substantiality. We may also be faced with the limits of an imminent death or the nothingness of a pointless existence. Nietzsche describes the world as “enclosed by nothingness as by a boundary” (Sedgwick, 2009: 153). This is his “Dionysian world of the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying” (154). Faustina exists as a microcosm of the larger world, in a state of self-creating and self-destroying, by submitting herself to mystic annihilation and recreation.

Artist

Nietzsche prizes art as “the highest task and the [only] truly metaphysical activity of this life” (1967: Preface). The artist can understand and overcome pointlessness through the act of creating. While fully knowing the insubstantial nature of life, they proceed to live, and to create. It is the artist who saves the

world from the disgusting nature of existence “through the artwork of tragic-comic thought” (1993: 89). It is tragic in its brevity, that we should feel so much and remain in existence for so little a time. For these same reasons it is comic—full of such care and concern, yet all ending abruptly. The horror and absurdity of living is tamed in the sublime expression of the artist and in the laughable nature of the intoxicating absurdity (89).

All art can be understood in an Apollonian and Dionysian opposition, where “every artist is an imitator; that is to say, either an Apollonian or a Dionysian” (1967: 2). Sandback is Dionysian. He created what Mark Taylor has called, “indeterminate excess ... indistinguishable from nothing” (1999: 210). Sandback embraces the Nietzschean state of becoming, openness and negativity as a part of the creative process. His threads weave a fluid meaning making in each moment, fixed yet transient, as if affirming the world as “formless negativity [in] primal flux” (Hatab, 1987: 98).

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche names Dionysus as the “eternal and original power of art” (1967: 86). Within the depth of this Dionysian potentiality it is the Apollonian task to make the world bearable through the “marvelous illusion” of beauty (Nietzsche 1967: 145). Through Sandback’s delicate rendering of form, thin lines capture and suspend a beautiful emptiness on the edge of a string, where we catch a glimpse of the controlling limits of Apollo.

In a Nietzschean interpretation, Sandback overcomes the absurdity of nothingness by identifying it, localizing it, and then creatively interpreting it in his rendering of voids. He exposed the nothing *of* the world *to* the world. This creatively elucidates inherent negativity by identifying and showcasing it.

Tying up Loose Ends

Nietzsche’s philosophical resolution rests in the creative interpretation of nothingness in tragic comic thought. He explains, “there remains a kind of pessimism, in so far as the

Dionysian being lives in a world without hope of redemption by way of a 'beyond' but it is a 'pessimism of the future' a 'Dionysian pessimism'" (1968a: 370). Our highest aspiration can only be to acknowledge this Dionysian pessimism and live on despite it. Both the saint and tragic artist continue on in the face of the nothingness of existence. They do this by 'overcoming' nothingness in creation: either by being sanctified or by being artful (Hatab, 1987: 95). The dynamic flux of becoming is internalized in the saint, who asserts their will to power over nothingness. The same interplay of power is alternately expressed artistically by manifesting the tragedy of life and clarifying it for all to bear witness. Ultimately, tension remains as long as we continue to hope for an end to Dionysian pessimism. Resolution comes in acceptance and moving on in the face of absurdity. The saint affirms their will to power through a lasting sanctimony and the artist through creation.

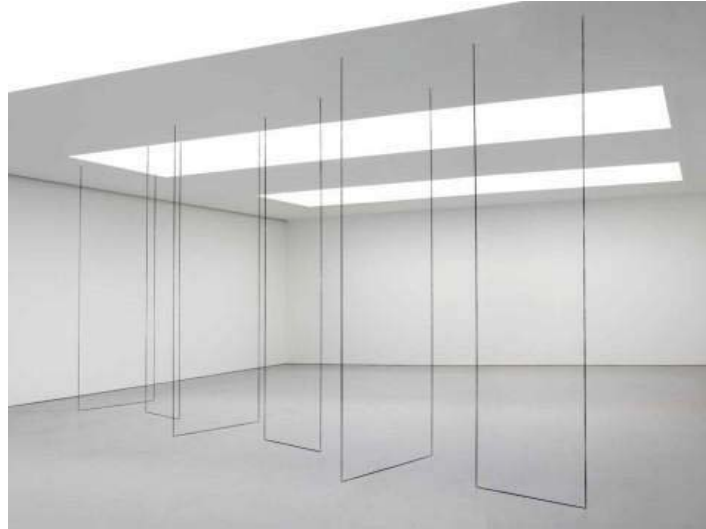
Otto unites interior and exterior nothingness through their wholly other nature as *mysterium tremendum*. Sublime beauty and the wholly other remain positive, allowing art to creatively materialize nothing and the mystic to regain form from formlessness. The sublime beauty of the no-thing, delimited by string, or the wholly other of the no-self in the abysmal no-place each leads us to realize that the no-thing is not nothing, it is the numinous. No-thing is sublime, wholly other and positive in Otto. Through artistic renderings nothing may become palpable and transport us into the numinous. By diving into the abysmal self, the nothing is both terrifying and stirring as we awaken to numinous energy. The numinous is at all times elevating and amazing. These are uplifting experiences that point to a transcendent reality, contouring the ongoing nature of existence.

The complex threads of Otto and Nietzsche wind closer than they might first appear. In the Ottonian interpretation, sacrifice of self leads to the infinite nothing of God. In Nietzsche sacrifice of God leads to a finite nothing of self. In each case there is sacrifice and nothingness. Ottonian nothingness however recedes as one regains form and sublime certainty. This is denied in the meaningless flux of Nietzsche's absurdity. Otto *seeks out* the nothing localized in art, while Nietzsche *overcomes* the

nothing using art. For Otto art has become a means of approaching and reaching numinous sublimity. For Nietzsche art has been a way of identifying and sublimating pessimistic reality.

In Nietzsche the nothing frames existence, yet it must be overcome to evade the desperate absurdity of living. Nietzschean philosophy affirms that *einmal* is indeed *keinmal*, as the insignificance of our forms weighs heavily on our appraisal of life as nothingness. In the depths of the wholly other numinous, we find meaning and hope in the continuation of self. Otto turns *einmal ist keinmal* around. No-thing or no-one occurs in singular insignificance. Each has the potential continue into a meaningful multiplicity of being, in other words - *keinmal ist nicht nur einmal - sondern auch mehrmals*.

Appendix



Source: Fred Sandback. Venue: David Zwirner, New York. January 9 – February 14, 2009. [<http://www.contemporaryartdaily.com/tag/fred-sandback/>]

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