

A Différance of Nothing *Sartre, Derrida and the Problem* *of Negative Theology*

JOSH TOTH

In Platonic fashion, I went from knowledge to its subject. I found more reality in the idea than in the thing ... From that came the idealism which took me thirty years to shake off.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Words*

As Christina Howells notes in ‘Sartre and Negative Theology’, it is easily assumed that Sartre was ‘a God-haunted or Spirit-haunted atheist, one haunted if not by the god of Christianity then at least by the god of idealism’.¹ Sartre himself, as the above epigraph suggests, was all too aware of the spectre of idealism that haunted—or better, *tainted*—his early philosophical endeavours. This taint, which is often translated by commentators of Sartre’s early work as a hypostatization of ‘nothingness’, is difficult (if not impossible) to reconcile with Sartre’s larger existential project. For this reason, and as a number of critics have recently noted, texts like *Being and Nothingness* have been largely dismissed, or simply ignored, in poststructural discourse.² This dismissal begins most notably with Derrida’s claim that the ‘*ens causa sui* ... as the *lacked*’ (BN 789) remains as ‘the metaphysical unity of man and God, the relation of man to God, the project of becoming God as the project constituting human reality’.³ In other words, Sartre’s negation of being ultimately privileges, in placing beyond scrutiny, ‘the essential project of human reality’ (EM 116).⁴ This ‘essential project’ is perhaps best understood as the *fulfilment*—that is, the *suturing* of the space of nothingness that separates the for-itself from the in-itself—of being as presence. In Derrida’s view, this understanding of nothingness as the lack that haunts the for-itself slips into the virtually inescapable logic of the *aufhebung*; nothingness, the (dis)jointure that eternally frustrates the possibility of synthetic fusion (i.e. the *ens causa sui*), is nothing other than the ‘negative’

representation of that impossible synthesis. In *French Hegel*, Bruce Baugh puts it like this: ‘however explicit Sartre’s denials of totality and synthesis, he implicitly affirms them in his very use of dialectical methods’.⁵ Hegel-like, then (or so it would seem), Sartre is ‘interested only in synthesis and totalisation’.⁶

Accordingly, any discussion of Sartre’s nothingness necessarily entails a close look at the problems associated with negative theology. As Howells has astutely pointed out, ‘The parallels between the mystical conception of God and the transcendent *néant* of Sartrean consciousness are striking’ (NT 550). And, if the accusations that Derrida levels at Sartre have any weight it is in this particular regard; Sartre’s discussion of nothingness, like the philosophical rhetoric of negative theology, ‘is a sophisticated reaffirmation of being parading as negation’ (DK 176). While struggling to escape, or move beyond, the Hegelian model, Sartre becomes entangled in recuperative dialectics; as the negated synthesis of the for-itself and the in-itself, Sartre’s nothingness seemingly takes on a metaphysical position akin to God, whose negation in negative theology ultimately functions as a type of unquestionable affirmation. However, as Howells also notes, Sartre is hardly ignorant of the metaphysical trap that threatens his project. Indeed, the sophistry of negative theology, along with the inescapable enclosure of recuperative dialectics, bears what *both Sartre and Derrida* ‘recognize to be an uncanny—but strongly resisted—resemblance to their own versions of paradoxical logic’ (DK 176). Perhaps not surprisingly, then, it is along the lines of Derrida’s critique that we can begin to recover the distinctly ‘poststructural’ elements of Sartre’s discussion of nothingness. What Derrida sees as recuperative is in fact founded in Sartre’s struggle to resist, or eternally subvert, the metaphysical pitfalls of recuperative dialectics and negative theology. Whether successful or not, then, Sartre’s discussion of nothingness, like Derrida’s deconstructive project, confronts, and is threatened by, ‘the overweening Truth claims of the totalising dialectic’ (DK 178).

With this in mind, I would like to focus the following discussion on the way in which Sartre’s conception of nothingness can be (at least partially) recuperated by reading portions of *Being and Nothingness* through, what we might term, a Derridean filter. I do not intend to (re)position Sartre as an unrecognised, or purposely ignored, precursor of deconstruction and the Derridean project; I will leave that task (viable, or not) to scholars like Howells and Nik Farrell Fox.⁷ Rather, I am interested in employing the work of Derrida—in particular his conception of the parergon, *différance* and play—as a way of understanding the theoretical impulses implicit in Sartre’s ‘anguished’,

and often confusing, discussion of nothingness. Sartre's 'idealism' does seem to prompt 'slips' into recuperative dialectics and manifest itself in moments of negative theology; upon final inspection, though, Sartre's understanding of nothingness can be recovered as a concerted struggle to evade the metaphysics of presence. By concentrating specifically (although not exclusively) on Part One of *Being and Nothingness* and Derrida's early essay, 'Differance',⁸ I will thus explore the possibility that Sartre's nothingness functions as a liminal space that permits movement toward, and the possibility of, meaning (or presence), while confounding the teleological enterprise of such movement through its perpetual, and inexhaustible, evasion of closure. That said, I am not interested in performing the type of reading that Steve Martinot has recently warned against; what follows is not an attempt to 'existentialize Derrida or transmute Sartre into a post-structuralist discourse'.⁹ At the same time, though, we need to examine Sartrean nothingness in retrospect, and with the apparent 'advances' of poststructuralism in mind, if we wish to apprehend what Sartre was ultimately *struggling* to accomplish. This is not to suggest that Sartre never 'slips' and that all his detractors (and even some of his defenders) have been mistaken in suggesting that he was driven by a certain desire for totalisation. Sartre was not (in any rigorous sense of the term) a poststructuralist. However, if we look at Sartrean nothingness in the light of concepts like Derridean *différance*, we can begin to see that Sartre's ability to negotiate certain metaphysical traps is often comparable to that of his most famous poststructuralist successor.

I

As it contains Derrida's first (and, perhaps, most damaging) discussion of Sartre, I will begin with a more detailed look at Derrida's 'The Ends of Man'.¹⁰ In this seminal essay, Derrida carefully distances his own deconstructive project from the apparent 'humanism' of Sartrean existentialism:

Not only is existentialism a humanism, but the ground and horizon of what Sartre then called his 'phenomenological ontology' ... remains the unity of human reality ... Whatever the breaks marked by this Hegelian-Husserlian-Heideggerian anthropology as concerns classical anthropologies, there is an uninterrupted metaphysical familiarity with that which, so naturally, links the *we* of the philosopher to 'we men', to the *we* in the horizon of humanity. (EM 116)

Refusing to acknowledge a marked break separating Sartre from his ‘metaphysical’ predecessors, Derrida accuses Sartre of unifying ‘man’ by announcing the common goal of the *ens causa sui*. While Sartre adamantly refuses the actual possibility of the *ens causa sui*, its privileged position as *lack* is (according to Derrida) a reification of that which ultimately signals the ‘essential project of human-reality’ (ibid.): ‘This synthetic unity is determined as *lack*: lack of totality in beings, lack of God that is soon transformed into a lack *in* God. Human-reality is a *failed* God’ (ibid.). As this *lack*—what we might understand as the space of nothingness that ensures the failure of ‘unity’—is in fact the unifying attribute of human-reality, ‘The example of the Sartrean project remarkably verifies Heidegger’s proposition according to which “every humanism remains metaphysical”, metaphysics being the other name of ontotheology’ (ibid.). And, in employing a term like ‘ontotheology’, Derrida neatly thrusts Sartre’s project into the realm of negative theology.

In Derrida’s opinion, Sartre’s valorisation of failure—his insistence on the impossibility of God (i.e. the *ens causa sui*)—can be read as symptomatic of a larger humanistic enterprise that reifies non-being as the surrogate of being beyond re(/ap)proach. Sartre’s insistence that man will always fail to achieve, yet be driven toward, ‘the real goal of his pursuit, which is being as a synthetic fusion of the in-itself and the for-itself’ (BN 797) functions in two distinct ‘ontotheological’ ways: on the one hand, it maintains the undifferentiated we of humanity by placing human-reality under the rubric of a single goal; on the other, the impossibility, or negation, of that goal—as exemplified in the nothingness that allows the ‘synthetic fusion’ of being to be simultaneously in *and* out of reach—ultimately attributes to the *ens causa sui* a ‘higher being’. Simply, and in a manner that recalls the type of theological negations embraced by someone like Eckhart, Sartre’s nothingness becomes, through a strange inverse of what we might expect, the very thing that Sartre appears (on the surface, at least) desperate to refute: nothingness comes *to be* an originary and essential absolute.

At this point, it is perhaps important to stress the connection between the recuperative tactics of Hegelianism and negative theology. After all, one of the primary thrusts of Derrida’s attack is that Sartre fails to distance his project suitably from a distinctly ‘Hegelian-Husserlian-Heideggerian anthropology’. Of course (on the surface, at least), Sartre insists that *Being and Nothingness* is primarily a refutation of the Hegelian dialectic¹¹—a claim that can be interpreted as an attempt to deny a complicit engagement with theological rhetoric. As

Howells points out, ‘the connexion between Hegel and negative theology is of course no accident: Sartre objects ultimately to what he sees as the surreptitious ‘recuperative’ aim of such theology, and of those mysticisms which place absolute reality in an undifferentiated unity beyond contradiction’ (NT 553). But, as Derrida suggests (and as we have seen), Sartre’s apparent objection is quite possibly hollow, especially if we recall that, by the end of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre himself has seemingly ‘place[d] absolute reality in an undifferentiated unity [i.e. the *ens causa sui*] beyond contradiction’. Consequently, Howells’ assurance that Sartre (like Derrida) ‘sees negative theology as a primitive version of an unacceptable dialectic positing an ideal synthesis beyond the tragic contradictions of human experience’ (ibid.) does little to absolve Sartre of the accusations laid against him. Nevertheless, Howells has made remarkable progress in terms of drawing the Sartrean project into poststructuralist discourse. For this reason, and before considering the possibility of ‘recovering’ nothingness, we might do well to take a cursive look at Howells’ various attempts to ‘save’ Sartre from what basically amounts to more than thirty years of disregard.

While critics like Fox, Martinot and Baugh have made more recent contributions to the discussion of Sartre’s connection to Derrida, Howells’ earlier work on the subject is of particular interest here. For the most part, this is because Howells consistently focuses on the issue of negative theology—an issue, I am suggesting, that is at the heart of the Sartre/Derrida problem. For instance, in ‘Sartre and Negative Theology’, Howells attempts to counter claims made by Jacques Salvan in *The Scandalous Ghost: Sartre’s Existentialism as Related to Vitalism, Humanism, Mysticism, Marxism*. Along the same lines as Derrida, ‘Salvan strives to interpret Sartre’s careful rejection of unity as a desire for unity, and by extension as a belief in the unity desired’ (NT 549). For Salvan, as for most critics of Sartre’s project, suggests Howells, nothingness ultimately seems to be little more than another, more clever, word for being. Referring to Sartrean *néant*, Salvan asks ‘whether this ‘pure Non-Being, which is the source of our liberty is very different from Heidegger’s Being, or for that matter, from the superessential Being of Plotonius, or from Brahma, defined by William James as a Non-Being charged with all the possibilities’ (NT 550).¹² Howells goes on to point out that ‘these forms of mysticism, whether they speak of Absolute Being or Absolute Non-Being, all refer to an originating undifferentiated unity, source of truth for all things, which Plotonius refers to as the One’ (NT 550). And, as I noted above, even Howells must admit that the tran-

scendental privileges that Sartre seemingly attributes to his *néant* are hard to deny. Still, Howells does her best, arguing that while Sartre places consciousness, ‘as *néant* ... beyond the reach of objective knowledge’ he nevertheless manages to protect ‘human consciousness ... from dissolution by idealist synthesis’ (NT 554). In this way, Howells appears to agree with Sartre’s own belief that ‘his version of salvation through failure’ is incomparable to ‘religious patterns of thought’ as it is ‘based in a resolutely non-recuperative ontology’ (NT 555). Because the synthetic union of the for-itself and in-itself would be ‘an *être* not a *néant*’ (NT 551) and because he consistently denies the possibility of such a union, Howells suggests that Sartre escapes the recuperative tactics that are the defining characteristic of negative theology. As Howells is aware, this argument is weak; it does little (if anything) to counter Salvan’s (or Derrida’s) claim that the very failure of synthetic fusion in Sartrean philosophy is itself presented as the essential unifying characteristic of human-reality. Concluding with an almost audible sigh, Howells concedes that Sartre is ultimately ‘curiously disinclined to acknowledge within theology itself philosophical intuitions which come remarkably close to his own view of the creative potential of negation’ (NT 555).

In two later articles,¹³ though—‘Derrida and Sartre: Hegel’s Death Knell’ and ‘Sartre and Derrida: *Qui Perd Gagne*’—Howells returns (with more success) to the problem of recuperative dialectics and negative theology in Sartre’s work. In these articles, Howells examines Derrida’s motivation in criticising Sartre. She thus necessarily approaches the work of Sartre as it is ‘mediated for us by poststructuralism’.¹⁴ For the most part, then, both articles function as refutations of Derrida’s claims concerning Sartre’s ‘persistent identification of being and presence’ (QPG 148). What is of particular interest, though, is Howells’ various attempts to draw comparisons between Derrida’s own project and that of Sartre’s. Although, as Philip R. Wood suggests,¹⁵ Howells’ attempt to ‘cast Sartre as poststructuralist precursor’ is quite possibly ‘mistaken’, there is significant weight in her claim that the critique of Sartre in ‘The Ends of Man’ is symptomatic of Derrida’s desire to deny the theological aspects of his own work.¹⁶ As Howells notes, ‘The vehemence of his rejection of Sartre is perhaps explicable in terms of a similarly close but resisted parallel between his own attempt to undermine Being and that of existential “nihilism”’ (DK 177).¹⁷ By first locating in Sartre and Derrida the same unceasing desire to avoid slipping into Hegelian synthesis, Howells demonstrates that Derrida’s desire to avoid ‘recuperative dialectics’—which he (mis)perceives in the work of Sartre—is equiva-

lent to Sartre's own attitude toward 'negative theology'. That is, the nature of Derrida's critique, with its emphasis on the theological logic of Being (re)affirmed as negation, functions to highlight the similarities between Derrida and Sartre's consistent attempts to subvert, and therefore escape, the metaphysics of presence. For this reason, Howells has been particularly adamant in stating 'that Derrida's notion of *différance*, while being radically impersonal and intended as a means of deconstructing consciousness—that cornerstone of humanism—is in fact clearly related to consciousness in the Sartrean sense' (QPG 150). And, as Howells herself has pointed out,¹⁸ any discussion of Sartrean consciousness is, necessarily, a discussion of Sartrean nothingness. Consequently, with Howells' suggestion that Derrida's *différance* is analogous to Sartrean consciousness as a point of departure, we can begin to re-appraise the possibility of saving nothingness as a concept that successfully and radically evades reification.

II

In 'Differance', Derrida is well aware of, and careful to deny, the apparent similarities between his description of *différance* and the 'sophistical' tactics of negative theology:

Thus, the detours, phrases, and syntax that I shall often have to resort to will resemble—will sometimes be practically indiscernible from—those of negative theology ... And yet what is thus denoted as difference is not theological, not even in the most negative order of negative theology ... Not only is difference irreducible to every ontological or theological—onto-theological—reappropriation, but it opens up the very space in which onto-theology—philosophy—produces its system and its history. (D 134)

Derrida is, of course, walking a fine line. While clearly admitting that *différance* somehow 'encompasses and irrevocably *surpasses* onto-theology or philosophy' (D 135, my emphasis), Derrida struggles to deny simultaneously the apparent fact that *différance* is synonymous with 'a supersedential reality ... beyond the finite categories of essence and existence' and, therefore, 'a superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being' (D 134). Immediately (in this 'pre-emptive' defence of *différance*), we begin to hear echoes of the accusations Derrida lays against Sartre. After all, he accuses Sartre of participating in the very 'theology' that he seriously fears will be (mistakenly) identified with *différance*. With this in mind, Howells' claims begin

to resonate with particular significance. If *différance*, as Derrida insists, is a successful evasion of what has previously been a virtually inescapable tradition of onto-theology, and if Sartre's nothingness can be attacked for the same reasons that *différance* seemingly *needs* to be defended, then we must concede the possibility that the projects of Sartre and Derrida are far less removed than Derrida (even in the fiftieth anniversary of *Les Temps modernes*) would like us to believe.

We are, in fact, faced with two distinct possibilities: on the one hand, the paradoxical logic of nothingness, like that of *différance*, only (and necessarily) *appears* to be 'onto-theological'; on the other, *différance*, like nothingness, *is*¹⁹ ultimately a hypostasised negation of that which it attempts to deny.²⁰ If the former is true, then a careful comparison of the work of Sartre and Derrida should provide us with the tools to counter the accusations laid against Sartre's nothingness—in particular, the virtually irrefutable claim that nothingness, as lack, as the eternal impossibility of synthetic fusion, functions as the essential and originary foundation that unifies human-reality. However, such a comparison threatens, also and instead, to confirm the latter possibility. We should thus proceed tentatively. For the time being, though, I will maintain my initial assumption that Sartre's nothingness can be recovered if we highlight the largely ignored features that it shares with several of Derrida's basic deconstructive concepts.

In Part One of *Being and Nothingness*, 'The Origin of Negation', Sartre attempts to 'establish the connection between' the for-itself and the in-itself—the two 'regions of being' (BN 33) that he 'discovered' in the introduction. From the very start, then, Sartre's discussion of nothingness is a discussion of relations, of liminal spaces. Although he is quick to admit that 'Descartes found himself faced with an analogous problem when he had to deal with the relation between soul and body' (ibid.), Sartre immediately distances himself from what he perceives as the futility of Cartesian philosophy: 'what we can retain is the reminder that it is not profitable first to separate two terms of a relation in order to try to join them together again later' (ibid.). Sartre is not interested in a relation that is, ultimately, a synthesis; the relation he wishes to posit is, in fact, a (non)relation, a relation without relation. Struggling toward a description of this (non)relation, Sartre examines the notions of 'distance' and 'limits'—terms that denote factors that 'condition' the disintegration of one form in favour of, or so as to 'realise', another: 'Exactly as in perception we constitute a particular object as a figure by rejecting another so as to make it a ground, and conversely. In both instances we find

the same quantity of negation which at one time passes into the notion of limits and at another into the notion of distance, but which in each case is suppressed' (BN 54). As each is effaced, or 'suppressed' in the moment of its appearance, neither the distance between, nor the limits of, these forms exist as 'things in the world'. They are (in the most extreme sense of the word) nothing. As functions of negation, both can be understood as 'secondary structure[s] of the object' (ibid.). Or, put another way, the possibility of apprehension, of distinction and thus identity, can be attributed to the fact that concepts like distance (what Sartre terms *négativités*²¹) 'are inhabited by negation' (BN 55). As regards the specific concept of distance, then, negation thus 'defines precisely the immediate relation which connects ... two points and which presents them to intuition as the indissoluble unity of the distance' (ibid.).

Extended to the realm of being in general, negation can be understood as that which permits apprehension while simultaneously preventing dissolution; in this way, it allows 'the totality of being to order itself around us as instruments ... to parcel itself into differentiated complexes which refer one to another and which can *be used*' (BN 59). Of course, as Sartre points out, 'The origin and foundation' (BN 56) of this relation that is negation is nothingness. Of particular importance, then, is the fact that 'Nothingness can be conceived neither *outside of* being, nor as a complementary, abstract notion, nor as an infinite milieu where being is suspended' (ibid.). Rather, nothingness must be thought of as lying 'coiled in the heart of being' (ibid.). And, as it is the for-itself (i.e. human consciousness) that, through a process of 'nihilation', 'causes Nothingness to arise in the world' (BN 59), Sartre will ultimately conclude, as we have seen, that the for-itself is determined as lack. Why Sartre feels compelled to locate the origin and, therefore, the agent of nothingness is a question that lies beyond the particular scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that, in first determining the for-itself as the agent and origin of nothingness, Sartre seemingly begins the line of argument that will eventually make his project vulnerable to attack. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that nothingness is, upon final analysis, the very possibility of non-synthetic relation. In this regard, it must be understood as neither being nor non-being, but rather as the very self-effacing condition through which we are able to apprehend the world and ourselves. As we have begun to see, Sartre repeatedly suggests that the experience of nothingness is the experience of a type of negativity, or frame—that is, the '*neutral state* between being and non-being' (BN 55), *between* the thing perceived and the ground

against which it is perceived, *between* that which I will be (or was) and that which I am not. As the very condition of consciousness, nothingness is the impossibility of presence, a non-existent injunction that is neither before nor after, inside nor outside: 'If our analysis has not lead us astray, there ought to exist for the human being, in so far as he is conscious of being, a certain mode of standing opposite his past and his future, as being both his past and his future and as not being them' (BN 65). And here, with this 'certain mode of standing', we come remarkably close to Derrida's own discussion of the frame, or parergon.

In *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida discusses the paradox of the frame. Focusing on Kant's definition of the frame as parergon, Derrida emphasises the inherent difficulty of attempting to distinguish the frame from the framed and that which lies beyond, or outside, the frame:

The parergon stands out [*se détache*] both from the ergon (the work) and from the milieu, it stands out first of all like a figure on a ground ... but with respect to each of these two grounds, it merges [*se fonde*] into the other. With respect to the work which can serve as a ground for it, it merges into the wall, and then, gradually, into the general text. With respect to the background which the general text is, it merges into the work which stands against the general background. There is always a form on a ground, but the parergon is a form which has its traditional determination not that it stands out but that it disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy.²²

Because the frame's function entails its own effacement, Derrida asserts that '*There is* frame, but the frame *does not exist*' (TP 81). Virtually synonymous with what Sartre understands as a *négativité*, the parergon produces a relation without relation, a liminal (non)space that defines (i.e. frames) both ground and figure 'but which in each case is suppressed'. As Jonathan Culler points out, 'the consequence of this relation between frame and what it frames is a 'certain repeated dislocation'.²³ This consequence of dislocation is expressed succinctly by Sartre: 'If being is present to itself, it is because it is not wholly itself. Presence is an immediate deterioration of coincidence, for it supposes separation' (BN 124). In other words, presence is always (dis)located, or differed (in both senses of the word), in the (non)space occupied by the parergon/*négativité*. For this reason, this 'relation' must be understood as lack that effaces itself as lack—what Sartre terms nothingness and (we might now venture to posit) Derrida calls *différance*:

the self-protection-of-the-work, of *energeia* which becomes *ergon* only as (from) *parergon*: not against free and full and pure and unfettered energy (pure act and total presence of *energeia*, the Aristotelian prime mover) but against what is *lacking* in it; not against the lack as a posable or opposable negative, a substantial emptiness, a determinable and bordered absence (still verifiable essence and presence) but against the impossibility of *arresting différance* in its contour, or arraigning the heterogeneous (*différance*) in pose, of localising, even in a meta-empirical way, what metaphysics calls, as we have seen, *lack*, of making it come back, equal or similar to itself (*adaequatio-homiosis*), according to a proper trajectory, preferably circular (castration as truth). (TP 80).

In a somewhat oblique manner, Derrida here returns to the threat of negative theology, further distancing its sophisticated discourse from his own project of deconstruction. Given the above discussion, though, Derrida's separation of the *lacking* that is the 'impossibility of *arresting différance* in its contour' and the metaphysical *lack* that is (via distinctly theological logic) recuperated as presence is, also, a separation of Sartre's nothingness from the recuperative discourse of ontotheology.

Derrida's claim that the *parergon*, as that which is *lacking* in the *ergon*, is in no way a metaphysical *lack*—that is, 'a determinable and bordered absence (still verifiable essence and presence)'—is wholly analogous to Sartre's various attempts to deny even the seemingly negative aspects of nothingness: 'Furthermore this nothing would by no means be negative. Nothingness ... is the ground of negation because it conceals the negation within itself, because it is negation as being' (BN 64). This is in fact a struggle that Sartre repeatedly undergoes throughout *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre clearly understands that he is constantly in danger of 'establishing Nothingness as a transcendent' (BN 57) and, thus, takes great pains to assure us that, 'if we speak of [Nothingness], it is only because it possesses an appearance of being, a borrowed being' (ibid.). While it is obviously not as dazzlingly circumlocutious as Derrida's, Sartre's avoidance of metaphysical recuperation is nonetheless apparent. In other words, Sartre struggles to assure us that nothingness, as *lack*, as the defining characteristic of consciousness and the for-itself, effaces itself in the very moment it asserts itself; an eternal (dis)location, the (non)relation that nothingness makes possible (or rather, *sustains*) is the very 'impossibility of *arresting différance* in its contour, or arraigning the heterogeneous (*différance*) in pose, of localising, even in a meta-empirical way, what metaphysics calls, as we have seen, *lack*'.

What we are beginning to see—or, at least, what I have been attempting to demonstrate—is that, like *différance*, Sartre's nothing-

ness is lack only insofar as it is the perpetual deferral of presence. Like *différance*, nothingness denotes ‘the interval of a *spacing* and *temporalisation* that puts off until “later” what is presently denied, the possible that is presently impossible’ (D 129). Just as ‘Differences are ... produced—differed—by *différance*’ (D 145), so too does nothingness make difference, and the world (as apprehensible), possible: ‘The for-itself is always in suspense because its being is a perpetual reprieve.’²⁴ If it could ever join with its being, then the otherness would by the same stroke disappear and along with it possibles, knowledge, the world’ (BN 787). In other words, the for-itself, as nothing, is only ever the ‘trace’ of being as presence; the being for-itself is always occupied in ‘a certain mode of standing opposite his past and his future, as being both his past and his future and as not being them’ (BN 65). With this in mind, the difference separating *différance* and nothingness becomes (for lack of a better word) nothing. After all, ‘*Différance* is what makes the movement of signification possible only if each element that is said to be ‘present’, appearing on the stage of presence, is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element’ (D 142). This ‘play of traces’ (D 146) can be, at least partially, aligned with Sartre’s understanding of ‘freedom’. Indeed, the eternal play of *différance* that is ‘a trace that no longer belongs to the horizon of being but one whose sense of Being is borne and bound by this play’ (D 154) is remarkably similar to the Sartrean freedom that ‘is characterized by a constantly renewed obligation to remake the Self’ (BN 72). Freedom, then, can be—and, perhaps, *should be*—understood as the *play* permitted (or rather, *necessitated*) by nothingness. That this freedom is manifested in states of anguish, and resisted in moments of bad faith, is thus succinctly explained by the fact that ‘There is no support to be found and no depth to be had for this bottomless chessboard where being is set in play’ (D 154). We might in fact summarise the impulse toward bad faith by stating that the Sartrean (non)relation of being to itself—what we might in fact understand as *an attempt to define* that which Derrida calls *différance*—is, like *différance*, ‘threatening and necessarily dreaded by everything in us that desires a realm, the past or future presence of a realm’ (D 153). What I am suggesting is that Sartre’s discussion of nothingness is a concerted (while not always successful) attempt to define ‘a spacing and temporalising, a play of traces’ (D 146)—that is, to define the paradox that Derrida terms *différance*.

III

According to Howells, Sartrean consciousness is comparable to *différance* in three distinct ways: ‘firstly as a deferring and a non-coincidence; secondly as differentiation; and thirdly as a producer of differences and ultimately meaning’ (QPG 150). Such a comparison has been given further credence by critics like Fox and Baugh. From Fox’s perspective, Sartrean consciousness, like Derridean *différance*, is constituted by ‘the temporal and temporalising mediation of a detour that suspends the accomplishment of fulfillment of a “desire” or “will”’ (NS 41). Likewise, Baugh points out that, ‘like the Derridean sign, Sartrean consciousness differs from itself, and precisely through a temporal movement of ‘deferral’, whereby the present can be what it is only through a mediation of the future’ (HG 62). We might say, in fact, and while following Baugh, that Sartrean consciousness and Derridean difference are ultimately very similar reformulations of Hegel’s ‘unhappy consciousness’.²⁵ In both cases, ‘consciousness is defined by the totality it lacks’ (HG 67). While I certainly (and obviously) agree with these critics, I have attempted to focus specifically on the term ‘nothingness’ rather than the term ‘consciousness’. Although consciousness and the for-itself are ultimately defined by Sartre as nothing, I would argue that, as terms, they are more likely to betray Sartre’s underlying desire to attribute agency and purpose to nothingness. In asking ‘where does nothingness come from?’ (BN 56)—and then answering with the for-itself—Sartre (momentarily) idealises nothingness as a subject that drives and, therefore, unites the ‘we of humanity’. As concerns his own project, Derrida is adamant that such a question (and answer) is extremely dangerous: ‘For if we accepted the form of the question in its own sense and syntax (‘What?’, ‘What is?’, ‘Who is?’), we would have to admit that difference is derived, supervenient, controlled, and ordered from the starting point of a being-present, one capable of being something, a force, a state, or power in the world’ (D 145). Not surprisingly, then, it is because of Sartre’s concluding remarks about the for-itself that, as we have seen, Derrida finds cause to attack the entire project of *Being and Nothingness*. However, as I have attempted to demonstrate, the description of the for-itself as lack is best understood if we view Sartre’s discussion of nothingness as a struggle to posit a liminal (non)space that is a perpetual deferral of presence (and absence). Simply, the lack that is the for-itself should be understood as lack only insofar as Derrida’s own conception of *différance* can be considered a conception of lack.

What we have yet to determine, though, is whether this aligning of Sartre and Derrida is a recovery of nothingness or a condemnation of *différance*. Does the above discussion prove that nothingness successfully evades hypostatisation, or does it show, contrarily, that *différance*, too, slips into the rhetorical strategies of negative theology? According to Arthur Bradley, ‘The difference between *différance* and negative theology is the difference between a restricted and a general negativity’.²⁶ While negative theology is ‘a form of dialectic or what ... Derrida calls a restricted economy’, *différance* is an ‘unreserved negativity’ (ibid.). That is, Bradley seems to suggest, *différance* is the impossibility of ever recuperating the metaphysics of presence. Unlike the theologian Dionysus, who ‘refuses all categories of existence and essence because the God whom he addresses is not an essential being but a superessential one ... Derrida refuses all these categories because the *différance* he addresses is not even a superessential being: “*différance* is not”’ (TO 60). But if simply (re)affirming Derrida’s own claims—that ‘*différance* is not’, that it *is* only as itself differed and deferred—excuses *différance* for seeming to be suspiciously like negative theology, then the above discussion (along with a number of others) must certainly excuse Sartre also. Yet, if both Derrida and Sartre engage in discourses that, at every moment, threaten to reify the very thing they are struggling to ‘deconstruct’, what about Sartre’s project makes it particularly prone to attack? As Bradley admits, Derrida’s project is undeniably ‘structured like negative theology’, yet Derrida (for the most part) seems to successfully evade accusations of hypostatisation and recuperation. Why? According to Bradley, ‘Derrida is able to admit his indebtedness to negative theology ... because ... [he] recognizes the impossibility of writing a discourse that does not negotiate the transcendental’ (TO 71). Perhaps, then, it is Sartre’s lack of unrelenting self-reflexivity—what Howells calls his disinclination ‘to acknowledge within theology itself philosophical intuitions which come remarkably close to his own view of the creative potential of negation’—that is the cause of the ‘stumbles’ that occur throughout *Being and Nothingness*.

In the end, then, it would seem that we are still faced with Sartre’s idealism, an idealism that seems to function in a twofold manner: the seemingly idealist refusal to recognise the necessarily theological aspects of his own discourse and, as a result, the subsequent tendency to hypostatise nothingness as an originary and unifying *lack*, or negative. This idealism is, perhaps, most notably echoed in the passages that dwell on anguish and nausea, on the lamentable and despairing experience of nothingness. There is never, in *Being and Nothingness*, a

moment of pure Nietzschean affirmation. This unrelenting focus on despair, I would argue, causes Sartre's discourse to be susceptible to positivism—that is, it tends (in, we might say, bad faith) to escape the anguish of nothingness by finding in it the purpose, or unity, of human-reality. After all, if both Derrida and Sartre are engaged in comparable reformulations of Hegel's unhappy consciousness, we must admit that Derrida's unhappy consciousness is far less unhappy than Sartre's. This is not to suggest that Sartre's project is, as Derrida would have it, a metaphysical humanism. As we have seen, Sartre's nothingness is, frequently, an obvious attempt to espouse the same differing and deferring (non)relation that is *différance*. Rather, I am suggesting that *Being and Nothingness* needs to be, ultimately, recovered and (re)read through Derrida because Sartre often has difficulty in conceiving of nothingness/*différance* 'without nostalgia' (D 159). Although Sartre's most damaging critic, Derrida allows us to 'affirm' Nothingness, and to approach it (again) 'with a certain laughter and with a certain dance' (D 159).

JOSH TOTH is currently Assistant Professor in the Department of Rhetoric, Writing and Communications at the University of Winnipeg. His recent publications include *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism* (co-edited with Neil Brooks), as well as articles on Derrida and Hemingway.

Notes

1. Christina Howells, 'Sartre and Negative Theology', *The Modern Language Review*, 1981, 76(3): [henceforth NT] 548.
2. References are to Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956) [henceforth BN].
3. Jacques Derrida, 'The Ends of Man', in *The Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University Press of Chicago, 1982) [henceforth EM], p. 116.
4. In his *To Be and Not to Be: An Analysis of Jean-Paul Sartre's Ontology* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962), Jacques Salvan echoes Derrida's concern: 'Does not this fundamental human project confer a "nature" on man, and define his "essence" in such a way as to limit his liberty? If there is only one end to all human activities, will it not become possible to tell what any man will do in a given situation?' (p. 126). Unlike Derrida, though, Salvan (in this particular book, at least) seems willing to accept Sartre's response to this particular objection: 'Sartre's answer to this question is that if there is such an essence of man, it

- is merely an abstraction which does not precede and determine his existence, but merely gives the truth, or the meaning of individual liberty' (p. 126). Of course, the primary motivation of this paper is to determine whether or not such a response is a valid defence of Sartre's project.
5. Bruce Baugh, *French Hegel: From Surrealism to Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 94. Of course, Baugh goes on to argue that Sartre actually manages to negotiate this apparent contradiction successfully: 'rather than the philosopher of dialectical totality his critics and defenders have taken him for, Sartre is a philosopher of irreconcilable tension' (p. 94). To a certain extent, I agree with Baugh. However, I would like to suggest that it is only possible to view Sartre as a 'philosopher of irreconcilable tensions' if we read him through a type of poststructuralist filter and, in so doing, 'bracket' some of his more 'totalising' tendencies. While Sartre clearly struggles to avoid slipping into the Hegelian model (and, for the most part, does), he often falls somewhat short. It is for this reason, as I suggest below, that he is particularly open for attack.
 6. Christina Howells, 'Hegel's Death Knell', in Hugh J. Silverman (ed.), *Derrida and Deconstruction* (New York: Routledge, 1989) [henceforth DK], p. 175.
 7. Fox's *The New Sartre: Explorations in Postmodernism* (New York: Continuum, 2003) [henceforth NS] is the most recent (and, perhaps, the most extended) attempt to reposition Sartre as a precursor of poststructuralism, if not (simply) a proto-poststructuralist. In a manner that echoes Howells, Fox suggests that 'Sartre's idea of a contingent, non-essential subject (which he argues for consistently throughout his work) has much in common with, and indeed prefigures, the decentred subject theorized by post-structuralists and postmodernists' (NS 7).
 8. Jacques Derrida, 'Différance', in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973) [henceforth D]. As the translation of this article maintains an English version of the term *différance* (i.e. without an accent), I will maintain that translation when quoting.
 9. Steve Martinot, *Forms in the Abyss: A Philosophical Bridge between Sartre and Derrida* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), p. 24.
 10. Of course, there are a number of direct (and indirect) references to Sartre throughout Derrida's oeuvre. For instance: in *Glas*, Derrida refers to Sartre as 'the onto-phenomenologist of signification' (p. 28); in an interview entitled 'Unsealing ('the old new language'),' Derrida identifies Sartre as a major influence but then asks 'What must a society such as ours be if a man, who, in his own way, rejected or mis-understood so many theoretical and literary events of his time – let's say, to go quickly, psychoanalysis, Marxism, structuralism, Joyce, Artaud, Bataille, Blanchot – who accumulated and disseminated incredible misreadings of Heidegger, sometimes of Husserl, could come to dominate the cultural scene to the point of becoming a great popular figure?' (p. 122); and (more recently), in his contribution to the fiftieth-anniversary edition of *Les Temps modernes* (i.e. the journal founded by Sartre), Derrida finally and surprisingly acknowledges the fact that Sartre's project is quite close to his own *while* simultaneously re-stressing a certain distance, reminding us that he was 'for and with *Les Temps modernes*, but not of it' (as quoted in Bruce Baugh, "'Hello, Goodbye". Derrida and Sartre's legacy', *Sartre Studies International*, 1999, 5(2): [henceforth HG] 70).
 11. I am thinking here, particularly, of Sartre's claim that 'we must recall here against Hegel that being *is* and that nothingness *is not*' (BN 48).

12. In his *Sartre: Theology of the Absurd* (New York: Newman Press, 1967) Régis Jolivet makes a similar argument: ‘Sartre, indeed, insists that nothingness does not exist and causes nothing. But it is by it that everything *exists*. Without nothingness there is nothing but the in-itself. Though the latter *is*, heedlessly and grotesquely, unable to stop itself from being, it does not *exist*. To explain existence, nothingness has finally taken the place of God. Sartrean existentialism is truly the theology of the absurd’ (p. 31).
13. Christina Howells, ‘Sartre and Derrida: *Qui perd gagne*’, in *Sartre: An Investigation of Some Major Themes* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1987) [henceforth QPG]. For ‘Hegel’s Death Knell’, see note 6 above. We might also include here Howells’ conclusion to *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*, ‘Sartre and the Deconstruction of the Subject’. However, this article is basically a synopsis (amongst other things) of Howells’ previous work; consequently, it repeats many of the arguments we find in the two articles mentioned above.
14. Philip R. Wood, ‘Derrida Engagé and Poststructuralist Sartre: A Redefinition of Shifts in Recent French Philosophy’, *MLN* 4 (1989), p. 861. I quote Wood’s article for two reasons. First, I think it is important to make some (however oblique) reference to Wood’s astute claim that ‘on Sartre’s own Hegelian terms, only what he called a ‘regressive analysis’ of the object in question (Sartre) at its most highly developed stage (currently Sartre as mediated for us by poststructuralism) can do justice to the object’ (861). Second, it is only by analysing Sartre through a post-structuralist filter that, it would seem, Howells is able to make any progress in terms of recovering, or ‘saving’, Sartre’s project. That the portions of Sartre worth salvaging are only made apparent with the aid of poststructuralist discourse will, of course, have obvious implications for the development of my own discussion of nothingness.
15. In ‘Derrida Engagé’, Wood also attempts to read Sartre *through* poststructuralism, and more specifically, through the work of Derrida. However, unlike Howells (and in a fashion that is outside the scope of my current discussion), Wood concentrates – initially, at least – on the misunderstood (or rather, misrepresented) concept of ‘totalisation’ in Sartre’s earlier work. Wood argues that, like deconstruction, the ‘activity of totalising does not consist of *homogenising* the elements of the practical field’ (p. 869). Rather, both ‘activities’ maintain, what Wood seems to describe as, an unrelenting process of bricolage. That is, every act of totalisation is, itself, an act of detotalisation. After describing these similarities, though, Wood proceeds to argue that, unlike *différance*, Sartrean totalisation is ultimately ‘inadequate for the purposes of describing historical process from a Marxist perspective’ (p. 871). Wood’s willingness to judge a theory based on its ability to explain ‘the difference between the exchange value and the use value of the same thing’ (p. 871) is undoubtedly problematic – particularly since it blindly presumes the validity of Marxist analysis. However, following this somewhat troubling argument, Wood concludes by citing Sartre’s last major work, *The Family Idiot*, as a successful and noteworthy example of a poststructuralist decentring of the subject.
16. In “‘Hello, Goodbye’”, Baugh echoes Howells’ claim: ‘If Derrida’s exorcisms of Sartre result from a too close proximity of Sartre’s thought and his own, it seems that Derrida (in his own words) “himself pursues relentlessly someone who almost resembles him to the point where we could mistake the one for the other; a brother, a double, thus a diabolical image”’ (p. 69). Baugh’s use of a passage from Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (trans. 1994) is particularly clever. Indeed, certain

- 'Specters of Sartre' certainly seem to haunt Derrida. That is, Derrida often appears to be haunted by both Sartre's legacy *and* Sartre's own metaphysical ghosts. In reading Sartre through Derrida, we might in fact ask (while again employing Derrida's own phrasing from *Specters*) 'how to distinguish between the analysis that denounces magic and the counter-magic that it still risks being' (*Specters* 47). Moreover, it seems quite likely that many of Derrida's exorcisms of Sartre are the effect of a certain 'hostility toward ghosts, a terrified hostility that sometimes fends off terror with a burst of laughter' (*Specters* 47).
17. Howells rephrases this argument in her more recent *Derrida: Deconstruction from Phenomenology to Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998): 'What is clear from Derrida's tussle with Hegel and negative theology is that he is all too keenly aware of the precariousness of his own position. Just as Husserl found it impossible to preserve full self-presence, even in the intimacy of interior monologue, so, conversely, Derrida finds it hard to maintain the negativity and absence for which he is arguing, uncontaminated by presence, plenitude and identity' (p. 134).
 18. In 'Negative Theology', Howells counters Hazel Barnes' argument that Sartre dissociates his *néant* from consciousness: 'the evidence of *L'Être et le néant* is against her. Sartre states explicitly that the *néant* of consciousness is more than a mere principle of negation and nihilisation, it has ontological status: this is the essential of the section "l'Origine du néant"' (p. 552).
 19. I italicise 'is' so as to stress that fact that if *différance* is susceptible to the accusations that Derrida lays against Sartre, then (contrary to Derrida's various claims), *différance* 'is'. As Derrida insists, though, 'if *différance* ~~is~~ (I also cross out 'is') what makes the presentation of being-present possible, it never presents itself as such' (D 134).
 20. We see this particular argument played out in the work of Richard Rorty – particularly in this various responses to Christopher Norris. According to Rorty, Derrida's early work – especially his use of concepts like Trace, *différance* and supplement – is symptomatic of an inability to wholly disregard a need for certain reified 'conditions of possibility'. Take, for instance, Rorty's assertion that 'all that supposedly deep stuff about the primordality of the trace in Derrida's earlier work looks like a young philosophy professor, still a bit unsure of himself, making quasi-professional noises' ('Response to Simon Critchley', in Chantal Mouffe [ed.], *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* [London: Routledge, 1996] p. 41). Of course, Rorty celebrates Derrida's later work because it refuses to make any particular 'argument'; it is, in other words, entirely private (or outside public apprehension). See, specifically, Rorty's chapter on Derrida in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
 21. Apart from distance, Sartre suggests that there are an 'infinite number of realities which are not only objects of judgement, but which are experienced, opposed, feared, etc., by the human being and which in their inner structure are inhabited by negation, as by the necessary condition of their existence' (BN 55). As examples of these 'realities', Sartre points to 'absence, change, otherness, repulsion, regret, distraction, etc.' (*ibid.*).
 22. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: The University Press of Chicago, 1987) [henceforth TP], p. 61.
 23. Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 196.
 24. In 'Sartre and the Deconstruction of the Subject', her conclusion to *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992),

- Howells translates this in a much more telling way: ‘the pour soi is always in abeyance, because its being is a perpetual *deferring*’ (p. 333).
25. Baugh provides a much more extended discussion of this claim in his more recent *French Hegel: From Surrealism to Postmodernism*. As he does in “Hello, Goodbye”, Baugh suggests in *French Hegel* that ‘What is distinctive about Sartre’s unhappy consciousness is that it is based on an ontology and theory of time that also lies at the heart of Derrida’s *différance*: a temporality that fragments and divides any would-be unity (consciousness, meaning). It is this theory of “being and time” that explains Sartre’s ambivalence towards Hegel, and connects him to our current concerns’ (p. 94).
 26. Arthur Bradley, ‘Thinking the Outside: Foucault, Derrida and Negative Theology’, *Textual Practice*, 2002, 16(1): [henceforth TO] 59.

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