Proemial Study

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"To Be or Not to Be": Was That the Question?
On My Book
Los poemas del ser y el no ser y sus lenguajes en la historia

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Abstract
This article presents my interpretation of Shakespeare's monologue "To be or not to be" in the framework of my book *Los poemas del ser y el no ser y sus lenguajes en la historia* (2017). It develops my thesis that "to be or not to be" proves not to be the real question for Hamlet, since he immediately abandons this metaphysical contraposition and proceeds to formulate in moving verses his real problem: the tragic misery of human life and of his own life, and the anguish and uncertainty of what comes beyond it if one takes one's own life. The difference between sleep and death is that, after the latter, consciousness will lack a body, and nobody can imagine what dreams could look like without it. But the whole monologue is an argument against trying to solve real life problems through rising to the utmost abstractions.

I have tried to summarize the significance of this monologue as a historical step between several ancient poems about being and non-being, and their relation to the real conflict of understanding life and death, and texts of Goethe, Hegel and Machado, which approach the subject from the new awareness elaborated by Shakespeare in his text.

Keywords: being and non-being, abstraction as domination of, and escape from, reality, prose and poetry, epistemology and philology, critical philology and philosophy, translation

About the Goal of the Book and Its History

Western philosophy discovered more or less since the beginning of the 19th century the crucial role of language not only in literature, but also in every speculation, as well as in the way we inhabit our world in our everyday life. Language thus became not only the concern of grammarians and experts on literature, but a central problem for philosophy and humanism.

Human beings are, according to Aristotle, "speaking beasts." But our speaking largely conceals its real nature. It suggests to us that it is hardly important, and that only the '*concepts*' *meant* by our words matter. It was a true cultural revolution when singular thinkers, above all the German Wilhelm von Humboldt, brought into consciousness not only that our thinking depends on our speaking, but also that speaking is no 'use' of an existing code (a grammar, a lexicon), but a *flowing activity of re-recreating each time our speaking habits and its single pieces*. And that 'language' *has real existence only when actually speaking each time*. Studying it could no longer rely on any 'ontological' conception of what we are used to call "language." It has to become a "linguistics of factuality" (Agud, *Virtuelle und faktische Sprache* 24).

Thinking about language and about its study puts the linguist (and the philosopher) before difficult theoretical and cultural challenges. Despite the long tradition of more or less scientific approaches to language, the fact is that turning human language into an 'object' remains a paradoxical enterprise, since we cannot put ourselves outside it. *Language is the primary condition of our turning whatever experience into an 'object,' and thereby ourselves into its 'subjects.'* We can, of course, 'constitute' partial linguistic objects and study them *as if they were exterior* to us, but we cannot prevent *our* language coining and determining whatever kind of approach we try to any object whatsoever, the linguistic ones included.

Whenever we try *to reach the ultimate conditions of knowledge and to revise them critically*, we have to concern ourselves with our language, i.e., with the speaking habits we resort to in order to focus on reality, our own reality (and language) included. Constituting linguistic 'objects' in grammar or in other kinds of linguistic research happens in and through sedimented words and expression habits we cannot put into question at the

same time. We have to rely on our words, and we have to trust them to be understood by our addressees.

The most frequent strategy when trying to grasp reality is to 'name' things and objects with *substantives*. Scientific prose tends to be highly nominalizing. But not every language is equally able to nominalize. Spanish has limited means of doing so, while classical Sanskrit, the true champion of nominalization, succeeds in reconducting even whole complex sentences into a single nominal compound. More or less at half the distance is German, which has developed a scientific prose with a high degree of quite 'natural' nominalization.

Nominalizing has something inebriating in it. It *stops movement and puts reality under static designations we understand as the names of 'concepts.*' They, in turn, are held to express some constant 'essence' of things, and we suppose them to be 'definable' with the aid of further, themselves definable nouns. All our 'scientific' categories share this condition: they are nouns supposed to reflect some constant essences (and we believe 'essence' to be more important and real than 'appearances'). But of course, they are only the *result of a nominalizing strategy* which *erases from our consciousness time, movement and change,* as well as the *subjective* condition of our representations, and lets us believe in a *fixed external reality* we can mentally grasp and control. Which is simply not true.

We imagine ourselves as dominating reality with our concepts, while in fact we are dominated by our *instinctive* tendency to fix reality through thinking *categories*. And, lastly, we do so *because we rely on a certain image of "being."* Whatever exists 'is,' and "being" is the *ultimate common quality of all*. With this word we have *nominalized existence* and have *created* the category of "being" as a last reliable fundament of every further categorization.

'Ontology,' the "science of being," thus became sorts of an *ultimate reference for speculative thinking*. In diverse cultures "being" became identified with other ultimate notions like God, the good, life, the universe… These somewhat less abstract but strongly emotional notions contributed to stress the presumed *importance* of ontology. Depending on how you conceive being, your speculative framework will guide your ideas

about life, the good, the ideas themselves, religion, eschatology, etc. in the corresponding direction.

Because of our *expectations* concerning "being," we instinctively imagine it as something static and permanent, as the *constant* and reliable property of reality and of ourselves. This is 'metaphysics.' Movement and change thus become problematic. This topic was already explicitly approached by Plato when commenting on Parmenides.

In Ancient Greece two opposed epistemological attitudes to reality became canonical: that of Parmenides, who passionately defended the *perfect unity of being and the non-existence of non being*, that is, of *relevant differences* (of contrasts between beings as well as of their contrast to *what they are not* in each case), and that of Heraclitus, who stated that "all flows" and that "you never bathe in the same river," that is, that being *is movement and change*. These two alternatives have also dominated Western philosophy thereafter, and so, "being," in its Parmenidian determination, became the founding concept of *identity*, the fundament of the trust in our own constant essence, and at the same time a *problematic concept*, since it did not allow thinking of movement and change as real. In turn, the Heraclitean idea of the basically moving and changing condition of what exists was generally rejected because it *destabilized* both ideologies and people.

'Identity,' the belief in the ultimate relevance of *what something 'is,'* is the refuge concept of whoever *fears losing or weakening his own 'substance,'* and this reaches from ontology to all kinds of nationalisms and of identitarian groups in politics, music, religion, etc. But we human beings do end, do die. Our identity gets definitely destroyed by death. The concept of "being" does not prevent our own definitive "non-being."

Explicitly or implicitly, this is the main problem of every speculative activity. Through categorial *theories* we try to build conceptual walls against the flowing condition of reality and of ourselves, and this is, thus, the main tool and means for controlling both, for securing a stable and safe environment for human life and consciousness. But we instinctively tend to expand this practical goal to an overall conception of the "whole," of "being." *We try to secure our being by anchoring it on a firm conceptual*

ground, and we believe to have achieved it through our *substantive* categories about the real.

"The being" proves to be an early final arrival point of this *metaphysical instinct* throughout history. We encounter it as early as in the Indian *Rigveda*, and later on as a main topic in speculative literature in all Indo-European cultures.

The original purpose of coining such an idea was evidently to posit it as *the ultimate* and *stable* concept, category, origin, or goal of existence or of reality. And this instinctive *longing for an ultimate reliable fundament* is part of the reasons why, quite early, "being" also became the subject of *poetic* treatments and formulations.

In poetry language does not pretend to fix reality under already defined concepts, but to go *beyond* them, beyond this habitual way of *taming reality,* and to search for a *real* ultimate fundament even of those apparently primary concepts. Poetic language, as we will see, allows some distancing from the instinctive metaphysics.

But early enough our cultures changed to speculative *prose*, which subsumes reality under substantive categories, treats them according to a conventional logic, and *stabilizes* consciousness with reliable conceptual anchors.

In my research I have tried to find out certain historical efforts to resort to *poetry* as a means of grasping the ultimate condition of being and non-being, and, thus, of recovering that very first revolution of human mind against the general trend of searching for a shared, prosaic stability of our representation of our own being. Poetry proves to be a kind of last refuge of human liberty – the liberty of speaking against the linguistic delusion of a well-structured, adequately and definitely categorized reality.

Poetry does not build a discursive argument against anything, but it creates *intuitive alternatives of perceiving reality and oneself*, which remain *open to individual interpretation and do not exist outside it*. Poetry is able to return language to its original power of exerting the *individual liberty* of *giving a form to one's own perception and reasoning*, because it excludes any pretension of 'saying the truth' within the conventional means sedimented in the shared expression habits. In a sense, a true first 'philosophy of being' can only succeed in the medium of poetry, or, as

Antonio Machado has conclusively shown to us, in a free and joyful combination of poetry and prose, each one relativizing the other.

Hamlet on Being and Non-being, and Its Precedents

It is difficult to understand why Shakespeare lets Hamlet begin his first monologue with the famous verse "To be or not to be: that is the question." This extremely *abstract* formulation does not reappear in the monologue. It is immediately abandoned, and Hamlet proceeds to show, in a highly emotional tone, the real and concrete miseries of human life. His doubt is no longer whether to be or not to be, but the complex and opaque reasons why, despite those miseries, finishing them through suicide seems to be no real option. God's prohibition is not that reason. It is rather *the doubt about what awaits us at the other side of our earthly life, after death.*

This doubt has dominated theoretical and poetic efforts since the very beginning of Indo-European cultures. My selection of texts in this book (*Los Poemas*) tries to understand the diverse ways of approaching it *through philosophic poetry,* based on some *general theory of being and non-being in each case*, over deep historical, linguistic and cultural gaps, since the *Rigveda* in India (1200 b.c.e) until Machado (20th century) in Spain. Hamlet's monologue, viewed in the framework of this intercultural history, marks a turning point not only in literature, but also in philosophy. Within this horizon its spiritual role acquires a new meaning.

The collection of texts in *Los Poemas* begins with the astonishing "Poem of non-being" within the *Rigveda* (RV10.129), whose opening verse is as provocative as that of Hamlet: "neither non-being nor being was then." The subject of this poem is not really any ontology of "being and non-being," but the *search for an ultimate ground for a "prima philosophia,"* which has to *transcend* even the apparently most basic and primitive logical opposition, that of being and non-being, in order to find out the last ground for human thinking and for the origin of universe. It is a sceptical composition which ends with the surprising statement "the origin of all this, whether it's done or not, / the guard who abides at the highest heaven, maybe he knows, but maybe even he does not know" (for the original and a Spanish translation, see Agud, *Los Poemas* 64-67).

Much metaphysical speculation in India is more or less directly an effort of making sense from this poem. An explicit connection with *life and death*, the real subject of Hamlet's monologue, appears in turn as the main subject of a somewhat later Indian text, the *Kaṭha Upanishad* which, much in the line of the "Poem of non-being," asks for the *being of the deceased* ("are they or are they not?"), and which leads to a strange, even paradoxical treatment of true wisdom: the inspired sage "is not born nor does he die, / he is from nowhere, he doesn't become anyone. / Non-born, eternal, imperishable, / this ancient being is not killed if its body is killed" (139).

This is the answer of Yama, the king of the world of the dead, to the question about what happens to people when they die. It is an extremely difficult idea: if you understand the *real nature of all*, its perfect unity *as* "being" (as the *bráhman*), you have to *transcend* such *concrete* dichotomies like that of good and bad, of you and another, of living and not living, and to *experience the real unity of all, and of yourself as part of it*. Dying is then no longer important: it is only some minor change within this overall unity. Knowing so is being redeemed.

Is then killing unimportant? Does it not matter? To this question answers my third text, a famous passage of the *Bhagavad Gītā,* where the hero Arjuna utters his moral doubts before a battle where he will be forced to kill his own relatives. God Krishna answers to that quoting the former text of the Upanishad and concludes that nobody kills really anybody, since killing the bodies does not affect the real person, the soul, which is "non-born, eternal, imperishable." So, the duty of a warrior is to fight and kill – not in order to win any practical fruit of his victory, but only for the sake of the duty itself, the *dharma* (Agud, *Arjuna's question*). God's doctrine thus puts itself at the service of the traditional cast-system ideology and tries to conciliate its cultural particularity with a *pretended moral universality*, rooted in the *ultimate abstraction of "being.*"

In Ancient Greece the philosopher Parmenides also confronted himself, in his "Poem about the nature of things," with the paradox of the *real, relevant differences* among beings and *our mental need for the firm ground of an all-comprising, non-changing "being,"* which radically excludes from existence any "non-being." Like the Upanishad, he adopted a resolute position against every form of non-being and declared it to be

unreal, non-existing and unthinkable. But surprisingly enough, the great majority of his text, mostly lost, was devoted to the "mere opinion" (*dóxa*) about the universe, the origin of single, different creatures and the relations between them, i.e., to what, according to himself, is absolutely untrue. Parmenides' doctrine about being became both the strong logical conclusion of the "philosophy of identity" and the proof of its uselessness for thinking about reality.

Being and non-being, life and death, are focused on in a new way by the Roman poet and scientist Lucretius, whose monumental work *De natura rerum* develops, in elegant and inspired verses, a new attitude towards reality and towards human existence. He is a radical 'enlightened,' who passionately argues against religion and superstition as well as against mere speculative reasoning about "being." The world is, according to him, a *combination of elemental particles and void*, of *being substances and of the space of non-being*. Human beings are for him, much like for the Buddha, aggregations of such particles, and death returns them to nature, as elements for new existences. The individual has no reason to fear death: when *it* comes, *he is no longer*. So, nothing more can happen to 'him.' And of course, no metaphysical prejudice should obscure the *empirical* fact that everything combines being and non-being. Human non-being after death is as real as human life, but it should not be the cause of any trouble, neither existential nor speculative.

Hamlet comes thereafter, many centuries later, with a new approach after deep historical changes: Europe has become a continent of reciprocally independent nations with their own languages, it is deeply coined by Christendom, it has evolved into an increasing secularization, philosophy has become an autonomous discipline, no longer a servant of Christian theology, and literature has developed new genres: powerful novels, intimate poetry, energetic national epics, and forms of theatre which have recovered ancient tragedy and comedy, often mixing them in tragicomedies, and which through fictions discuss relevant theoretical topics.

In Western Europe the eventual synthesis of Christianism and Hellenism led to a kind of consciousness of the human individuality which, step by step, deconstructed all metaphysical approaches and returned ideas

back to the organism producing them: to a *self-consciousness rooted in a mortal body*. Human consciousness knows itself to be as mighty as ephemeral, and it lives in and from this conflict.

In the transition from medieval philosophy to the Modern Age the old trust in explaining all through abstractions, and with a logic based on a transcendental and revealed truth, vanishes together with the trust in the presumed evidence of what our senses and thinking habits offer to our consciousness. *Thinkers can no longer believe that our abstractions grasp reality correctly and adequately*. From Descartes on, speculative thinking is concerned with the question if human beings can or cannot, and to what extent they can, understand what happens within and outside them by *subsuming* more or less empirical and obvious ideas under more abstract ones, and by building with them valid 'explanations.'

The modern thinking subject looks critically into his own interior, as a subject of knowledge and action, and eventually *he calls into question everything concerning himself.* He feels committed to doubt not only about what he cannot explain, but also about his own explanations. He not only has to discard God as the warrant of his objectivity: he has to undertake the titanic effort of trying to know himself, to assess his capability of going beyond himself and of reaching a reliable objectivity, also *comprising himself.*

Shakespeare's tragedies represent one of the earliest, more complex and more lucid expressions of this new course of thinking of the modern European subject, who is forced to reconstruct piece after piece each and every certainty he might have.

The topic of being and non-being of our monologue appears in the core of a drama which digs most intensively and dramatically into the human nature as into something *complex and inherently contradictory*. For the Western individual the problem is no longer only epistemological, like in most ancient texts, but something concerning concrete life in its totality: being and non-being are alternatives depending on a *decision* nobody could take without the deepest anguish. Our poem describes the calamities of being, but it shows how *the fear of the unknown* discards for us the option of finishing it by ourselves. We cannot know what our "non-being" would

be like: consciousness with its pale reasonings does not reach until there, but it is enough to stop the "action" which would finish being's misery.

Thus, it is extremely significant that, in a monologue expressing the most burning anguish of a human being faced with the misfortunes of earthly existence and with the uncertainty about what could be beyond it, the author puts at its beginning just the *abstraction* of the *old metaphysical alternative of being and non-being.* And, as we will see, with this literary initiative Shakespeare opens a new horizon to this same metaphysics.

In a sense he deconstructs it from its very roots. He drags the old metaphysical abstractions down to the soil of life, and he confronts our consciousness with *our* being and non-being, with *our* life and death, with *our* certainties and uncertainties, without euphemisms nor *escapes into abstraction*. He decidedly stresses the full burden of meanings, emotions and real contents those two concepts may carry with them here and now when you *leave the level of the supreme abstraction and plunge into real life*. Asking yourself about "being and non-being" is now asking if you accept to live what has been allotted to you or not, and the price of such asking is an agonizing uncertainty.

This uncertainty is neither alleviated nor, even less, neutralized or removed by any religion whatsoever. Much has been speculated about Shakespeare's God, as well as about the possible sense of having located *Hamlet* in a pagan Denmark, but Hamlet's environment is unequivocally Christian. Only, in the play God is simply not there. There are, of course, indirect mentions, for instance that human beings are created "god-like," but God is mostly and significantly missing from this drama. There are heaven and hell; the ghost says that he comes from the purgatory, and angels are mentioned leading the souls to the eternal rest, all of which confirms the Christian reference framework, but Christianism is part of what Shakespeare deconstructs in his *Hamlet*.

The murderer king tries to pray and he cannot. He knows that "heavens" do not get confused nor let themselves be cheated. He does not mention God: he argues rationally that for a crime like his there can be no mercy, since he still enjoys the fruit of it and, thus, he no longer can really pray: he has put himself outside this realm.

Hamlet never addresses God, and when he declares that he is going to pray, this is a clear sarcasm. He sends Ofelia to a convent in order to prevent her from ever giving birth to someone like him, and also to prevent her from joining the ominous cohort of women who, with their worldly trickeries, turn men into monsters. He does not send her to pray nor to consecrate herself to religion or God, but simply to get away.

Those "heavens" repeatedly mentioned in the play are neither the paradise of the righteous nor the abode of the one God. They remind us more of the "heaven" of the Chinese culture, or the impersonal cosmic justice of the Indian *samsāra*, and they look rather like the heirs of the "fates" often invoked by the Greek tragedies, which preside the course of things and let them happen according to their own logic. In *Hamlet* men themselves forge their destiny, and they have to bear the consequences of their options. But Hamlet never utters the idea that, if he murders his uncle, he will himself go to hell: he is only interested in sending his uncle there, without any opportunity of avoiding it through repent.

Hamlet certainly cries out "*O God, o God*" after his only reference to a divine commandment: "*or that the Everlasting had not fixed his canon 'gainst self-slaughter!"* But this sole cry is part of a desperate narrative about the repugnant behaviour of his mother, and here the literality seems to me quite irrelevant: it is a conventional and void cry, and it does not reappear in the play.

In our monologue a young and attractive prince, beloved to everyone, a cultivated, pleasant person, weapon-skilled, thoughtful, sensitive and intelligent, discovers that he is living within an utmost repugnant lie: his mother is accomplice to the murder of his father, she has shamelessly thrown herself into the murderer's bed, and has thereby legitimated his position as the new king. Hamlet has sworn that he will revenge his father, which he eventually does, but his grief is so strong that he would prefer to disappear for ever, to "cease to be."

His reflections about life and death are not triggered by the father's death, but rather by the *possibility of deciding by himself whether to live or to die*, by the anguish of this decision and its motives. Finishing one's own being and throwing yourself into non-being: what kind of alternative is this? "The Everlasting has prohibited it," Hamlet remembers shortly before. But

in the monologue this topic is no longer there; there is only the uncertainty about *the real condition of that "non-being,"* which resembles sleeping but could not be like it. When sleeping, human beings go on thinking, but what would thoughts be like in a bodiless consciousness? (And what is the Christian God other than a bodiless consciousness?)

In Christian Europe not even someone as un-religious as Hamlet could imagine that consciousness comes to an *absolute end* when the body dies, much unlike Lucretius, who reached his peace of mind just by calmly accepting his finitude. And neither Hamlet nor Shakespeare are Roman patricians who live a thoughtful leisure at the cost of alien labour. Both inhabit the mud of a turbulent society, their minds coined by a dogmatic and contradictory monotheism but already opened to its criticism, and both rebel against religious obscurantism, injustice, and treachery, against the frivolity of rulers (it is highly significant that Hamlet criticizes how rulers send twenty thousand young men to die for whatever triviality), against the corruptness of priests and courtiers. Hamlet mercilessly ridicules Polonius and other servile persons, and he violently insults the priest who bumps off Ofelia's funeral rite.

Hamlet's tragedy is no longer that of Orestes and his family. It is contaminated by a thorough hypocritical *society* which pretends to have answers for questions it does not even ask, which hides the crime and consecrates the murder, which exploits and humiliates the poor while it implores God's mercy, which prays and kills. Although human beings were created "*god-like in apprehension*," we act like beasts who did not get this gift and, thus, we are and are not consciousness at the same time.

Hamlet opposes in his monologue the murkiness of thoughtfulness to the bright simplicity of action, but he has to concede that the former has definitely contaminated the latter. As human conscious beings we no longer can act innocently. Simply acting does no longer redeem us from ourselves, and merely fulfilling his oath of revenge will not return to Hamlet what he has lost. What could do so?

For this question there is in *Hamlet* no institutionalized answer, neither of the church nor of the law. At the beginning Hamlet declares that he is not fond of his life. So, what prevents Hamlet from suicide is not the *bhavakāma,* the "desire of being" which the Buddha declared to be the real

cause of the attachment to the eternal chain of lives. It is rather the *panic when faced to one's own non-being*, that unconceivable thing "which is the dying."[i] And like our Manrique, Hamlet dies mainly concerned with the interest of Horatius's surviving in order to tell the truth and to transmit to further generations the knowledge of his story. Only this *survival of his memory* allows him to accept vanishing into non-being.

At the beginning of his monologue Hamlet tries to face his grief by resorting to an old cultural strategy: *climbing to the utmost abstraction* in order to *simplify* the problem. The alternative of being and non-being is the simplest one, the first logical opposition before any real content. But as soon as he formulates it, Hamlet understands that this metaphysical shortcut does not lead anywhere. Its simplicity is only apparent, not much more than an academic cover (the famous "simple, clear and false solution"). He has to become concrete, to come down on the abstraction ladder he had so resolutely climbed. He has to resign from a purely apparent clearness and to dive into the real profile of human living and dying. Parmenides had prohibited himself to speak about the non-being, in order to *prevent contradiction*. Hamlet has to let aside the abstract dichotomy of being and non-being in order to prevent that *its simplicity obscures the real complexity of living and of consciousness.*

After Hamlet, in Europe being and non-being could no longer remain the same concepts. In their history this poem marks a turning point. It begins with a succinct, quite prosaic statement, which nonetheless proves to be a dead-end street, and immediately after it changes to a *poetical* flight, to an intellectual and literary effort like that of the "Poem of non-being," trying to answer the first question *with the language of poetry*, with its artificial and seducing rhythm, with its music rich in motives and in semantic melodies and harmonies, with its baroque sudden interruptions and anxious contrasts, and, above all, with its open semantics. But unlike that poem, here the initial abstract theme of being and non-being gets mixed with the "coil" of concrete and sensorial life, with misery, grief, and uncertainty and with the whole confusing "heritage of the flesh": with the *embodied being and non-being*. Embodied in a conscious body, with its rare faculty of stopping our action where it could free us from all pain, and of fogging it.

"Grey, dear friend, is theory," would say later on Goethe's Mefistofeles to Faust, also tempted to end his life. However, Mefistofeles does not prevent Faust's suicide with grey considerations, but by tempting him with the "golden green tree of life." Hamlet, in turn, is no learned monk with metaphysical doubts: he is an aristocrat suffering under the burden of a terrible personal tragedy. For him *consciousness* becomes a factor of confusion in front of the complexity of life. He dreams of an *action* which would be the final solution, but which has lost its redeeming face. Much unlike him, Faust, the tortured scholar in search of life, concludes happily the translation of the first verse of John's gospel saying: "at the beginning was *action*." But he was still at the beginning of his own tragedy and did not know anything about it.

Hamlet's monologue is a text in which we clearly notice that it is *only the 'verbal flux' of a theatre scene*, where words are only one part, much like in real life. It is a text demanding silences which are not in the score, and tones, gestures, attitudes, movements… You cannot translate it without visualizing its declamation and performance on a real stage. These words contain strong scenic challenges.

My own translation into Spanish (Agud, *Los Poemas* 219-220) is thought for a mostly *sotto voce* diction, nearly muttered, while nervously coming and going, sometimes even with the back to the public, partly said very fast and partly slowly and interruptedly. It has to reflect *a personal struggle with words and ideas,* never concluding anything, searching for expression, trying to think clearly… All resources of diction have to be engaged: volume of the voice, dynamic and agogic of the discourse, tonal differences… Its performance has to show that the character is squeezing his brain in search of the words, trying to invent on the go a language which channels his despair. Its formal complexity has to seem the result of this effort, not something composed as a score on a desk. It is no written text later on *recited* on the stage: it is a *staging of* "*the ever-re-initiated spirit's work to make the articulated sound able to express the idea*," which is Humboldt's definition of language (418).[ii] Its words become clear only as they get a profile against the shadows of the accompanying silences and with the help of gestures and gazes anticipating and shading their sense.

All this turns this text into a unique piece within my selection of poems about being and non-being. This is not only poetry going beyond prose: it is text conscious of being only part of an *integral scenic language* composed of bodies, movements, gestures, gazes, lights and shadows, cries and whispers, all of which completes and profiles the words, and roots them tangibly in the complexity of a single human being here and now. It is *real* language. With Hamlet's monologue the being and the non-being of Western metaphysics have "entered existence" (Hegel) and have become embodied and existential.

The question was, thus, not "to be or not to be." The old metaphysics Hamlet resorts to at the beginning does not offer to him the kind of orientation he desperately was looking for. And he proves not to be able to determine himself but a small part of his "destiny" with his plans and schemes. Both the liberty and the wickedness of *others* put in motion the series of events he got involved in, an exclusively human haphazard not controlled by anybody's reason.

Within European literature (unlike in philosophy), nobody would ever try again to alleviate the tragedy of human finitude by resorting to the metaphysics of the ultimate abstraction (Kundera's title of his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* seems to me more rhetorical than really serious). We human beings have since tried to know about ourselves much in the line of Lucretius: without gods. Or as cries the poem "Mut" (*Courage*) of Wilhelm Müller, to which Schubert composed his moving music in the "Winterreise": "If there has not to be a God on earth, / let ourselves be gods!"

For this effort of understanding ourselves, a thinker of exceptional lucidity will provide us with a good reason for no longer believing that the problem is "to be or not to be": Hegel.

Hegel's Self-critical Conclusion and the "Variations" of Goethe and Machado

My "prose interlude" devoted to Hegel's treatment of being and nothing in his *Science of Logic* (Nürnberg 1812-16, pp. 82 ff.) provides an accurate

philosophical background to Shakespeare's change of direction concerning the reflection on being and non-being. Reduced to its skeleton: Hegel demonstrates that the ultimate abstraction of "being" has as its real content the *negation and exclusion of every determination.* The naked fact of "being," deprived of any specification of being *this or that*, therefore yields an entirely *void* concept, whose content is actually "*nothing*." The opposition between being and non-being proves thus to be only apparent, and climbing to such an ultimate abstraction prevents thinking from grasping anything real. From this starting point on, Hegel proceeds to successively deconstruct all conceptual dichotomies of the Western tradition, and he retraces them to the real *movements of consciousness* when stating them, when denying them critically and when overcoming them through new more complex concepts. This is the fundament of his "dialectic logic."

Being and non-being had to become different concepts from this seminal text on. But philosophers mostly disregarded this radical refusal of any metaphysical ontology, and either ignored it and went on with metaphysical thinking habits, or simply ceased to concern themselves with being and non-being.

Shortly after Hegel's *Logic*, Goethe, in a curious and exquisite poem with the title "One and all" (*Eins und alles,* ~ 1820)*,* offers a new poetic treatment of the category of being, this time *against* the *longing for permanent 'identity'* in life. The poem is quite abstract: its subject is "all," which comprises human consciousness as well as the whole of reality. And its main thesis is: "to transform whatever was created, / and that nothing arms itself to stiffness, / works eternal, living action. / What was not, now will become / . . . it has to move, to act creating, / first giving form itself, and then transforming it, / it only seems a moment keeping quiet. / The eternal moves forward in all…"

And he concludes: "Since all will have to turn to nothing / if it persists in being" (for the German original and its Spanish translation, see Agud, *Los Poemas* 254-256).

This poem seems to turn back to the metaphysics of being, albeit in its Heraclitean variant, i.e., to an abstract being as *equally abstract eternal change and movement*. It resolutely opposes any static conception of being,

but it returns to a level of abstraction which Shakespeare had already rejected as a productive solution for anything human at all. And this is all the more surprising, since Goethe had devoted a whole and most influencing novel, his *Wilhelm Meister,* to the performance of *Hamlet* by an itinerant theatre company. This quite voluminous work, having *Hamlet* as its central subject matter, does not say a word about our monologue, which had already become very famous in Germany.

Some ten years after the publication of this poem, Goethe wrote a true "*palinodia*" in his famous "Legacy" (*Vermächtnis*), which begins with the verse "No being can be turned to nothing!" This much longer poem deploys a decided denial of the former, full with philosophical considerations and with clear references to Kant, but in an almost conservative, authoritarian and non-critical, markedly classicistic tone. The well-known German tendency to follow masters and leaders, Goethe's personal inclination towards aristocracy and quietness, and a passion for a presumed universal order to be maintained, qualify this late composition as quite the opposite of "One and all." But, in a sense, it seems consistent with its return to the level of utmost abstraction, and with the absence of any commentary on Hamlet's monologue. Probably the latter disgusted Goethe. The miseries of human life, of injustice, exploitation and corruption, were no attractive subject matter for him.

The history of the poetical efforts of grasping life and death under the abstract categories of being and non-being would have finished here, in the idealistic Germany of the 19th century, if more than a century later, and far away from it, in Spain, the poet and philosopher Antonio Machado had not dared to write a further chapter of it, and a really conclusive one. Its deep philosophical insight and its impressive poetical quality closes this history at the highest literary and philosophical level.

Within a book mixing prose and poetry ("De un cancionero apócrifo"), Machado wrote a sonnet about the non-being or "The Great Zero," and some non-strophic "*coplas*" (couplets) about the "Great Fullness or the Integral Consciousness" (*Al gran pleno o conciencia integral*), introduced and commented on in philosophical and quite ironical prose.

Since the readers of this article may hardly be familiar with these two poems, and despite my very limited competence as a translator into English, let me offer at least a rough image of their content.

AL GRAN CERO	TO THE GREAT ZERO
Cuando el Ser que se es hizo la nada y reposó, que bien lo merecía, ya tuvo el día noche, y compañía tuvo el hombre en la ausencia de la amada.	When the Being, who is by itself, created nothing And went to rest – which he had well deserved, The day acquired night, and company The man without a beloved one.
Fiat umbra! Brotó el pensar humano. y el huevo universal alzó, vacío, ya sin color, desubstanciado y frío, lleno de niebla ingrávida, en su mano.	*Fiat umbra*! Human thinking sprouted out and raised the universal egg, void, without colour, de-substantiated, cold, full of weightless fog, within its hand.
Toma el cero integral, la hueca esfera, que has de mirar, si lo has de ver, erguido. Hoy que es espalda el lomo de tu fiera,	Take the integral zero, the hollow sphere You have to look at, if you see it, upright. Now that the back of your beast has got your back,
y es el milagro del no ser cumplido, brinda, poeta, un canto de frontera a la muerte, al silencio y al olvido.	And the wonder of non-being is fulfilled, Devote, o poet, a frontier chant to death, to silence, to oblivion.

AL GRAN PLENO O CONCIENCIA INTEGRAL	TO THE GREAT FULLNESS OR INTEGRAL CONSCIOUSNESS
Que en su estatua el alto Cero – mármol frío, ceño austero y una mano en la mejilla -, del gran remanso del río, medite, eterno, en la orilla, y haya gloria eternamente. Y la lógica divina que imagina, pero nunca imagen miente – no hay espejo; todo es fuente –, diga: sea cuanto es, y que se vea cuanto ve. Quieto y activo – mar y pez y anzuelo vivo, todo el mar en cada gota, todo el pez en cada huevo,	In his statue the high Zero (Cold marble, Austere frown, And one hand on his cheek), May think eternally at the shore of the river's large backwater, and glory be eternally. And divine logic Imagine, But the image never lies, (There's no mirror, all is spring), May say: be Whatever is, and be seen Whatever sees. Quiet and active, Sea and fish and living hook, All the sea in every drop, All the fish in every egg,

todo nuevo –,	All new,
lance unánime su nota.	raises its unanimous note.
Todo cambia y todo queda,	All changes and all rests,
piensa todo,	All thinks,
y es a modo,	And when it runs,
cuando corre, de moneda,	It's like coins,
un sueño de mano en mano.	A dream from hand to hand.
Tiene amor rosa y ortiga,	Love has rose and nettle,
y la amapola y la espiga	And poppy and spike
le brotan del mismo grano.	Sprout from the same seed.
Armonía;	Harmony:
todo canta en pleno día.	All sings in broad daylight.
Borra las formas del cero,	Erase the forms of the zero
torna a ver,	And see again,
brotando de su venero,	sprouting from its spring,
las vivas aguas del ser.	The living waters of being.

These poems are the late result of many years of philosophical efforts, laid down in poetry and prose, which compose a huge work developing an increasingly sceptical criticism of Western ideologies and of a more or less narcissistic aestheticism. Their words are all 'thematic': each one points to quite concrete problems already treated in depth by Machado.

The "great zero" is for him the result of the kind of abstraction which actually leads to *conceptual qualitative voidness*, but enables human beings to dominate being through "thinking it as non-being," as quantity and negation. Human beings thus inhabit a negative (scientific, dogmatic) world of shadows created by us, a realm of darkness: "*fiat umbra!"*

In contrast to it, the "coplas" of the integral consciousness dissolve the categories of thinking obtained through negations. "There's no mirror, all is spring." The poem "returns to the living waters of being, flowing from their spring," and all is light, all is new, and there is no longer any difference between "the sea, the fish and the hook" with which we try to fish parts of reality for our convenience.

The stylistic difference between the utmost formal severity of the sonnet and the light popular verses of four and eight syllables of the "coplas" marks the difference and opposition between scientific strictness and the poetic joy of life, although these apparently simple verses elaborate the main topics of Western philosophy in an accurate, extremely precise and critical manner.

There is no space here for analysing in depth this complex poetic and philosophical diptych. Just a couple of interpretive keys: Machado symbolizes with the zero the *lack of qualities* of whatever is dealt with quantitatively, as well as the ignorance of the "*essential heterogeneity of being*" under generalizing concepts. The *real being* painfully creates that nothing and goes to rest (does not try to reflect on what he has done), and the *essentially needed other* (the beloved) is substituted by a world of established contrasts accompanying the subject in a new reality of its own. The egg representing the universe, under the constant denial of relevant differences among individuals and the fixing of general concepts based on what things are not, has gotten 'de-substantiated,' lacks the warmth of life, and loses any weight within consciousness. Human beings are no longer beasts, they stand upright and have tamed their wild nature, but, in order to reach this, they have created an *alternative world of negations*, and, lastly, they only can sing to their own death as living individuals (the scientist's personality does not count in science), to the silence of a really human, individual and poetic language, and to the oblivion of their true nature.

Conversely, while the whole world of fixed *identities*, founded by our thinking categories and by the scientific language, has to remain besides the flowing waters of real life, its subject absorbed in his own mental creations and stiffened into stone, life celebrates its glory, and the real subject does no longer try to *mirror reality in concepts*, but *flows in images and intuitions* (with a different logic, a "divine" one) *and enjoys the unity of being*. It renounces to think of itself as *separated* from its 'objects,' it no longer separates drops within the sea, no longer tries to fish for himself, but sings a single note which is at the same time the common polyphony of a being *not torn apart by conceptual distinctions*. Ideas are here *dreams, not concepts* (diffuse, not defined), and they (their words) run from hand to hand, from individual to individual, like coins, instead of building together any linguistic 'system.' Differences go back to the unitary source of the subject, and their oppositions are only differing *paths in life*, not contrary to each other but in *harmony* within oneself, in the light of the day. The artificial forms and shadows generated by quantitative thinking are to be set aside, since only so will the subject *return* to the enjoyment and the suffering of the flowing existence.

This poem strongly reminds us of the paradoxes in the language of the Upanishad, with its efforts to overcome the narrow constrictions of our thinking habits and to imagine being as enjoyment (the 'subject of knowledge' is called there *bhoktar,* "the enjoyer") of the unity of *brahman*, beyond conceptual oppositions. In those Indian texts this attitude is in itself *redemption*, and it frees the subject from the painful chain of the successive existences.

In Machado's poetry¸ in turn, it is the beast, our animality, which has to be freed in order to fulfil the most real need of human beings, the need for *other* subjects, without reducing them to concepts. *Love* becomes the alternative to categorial knowledge, and *recognizing alien individuality* becomes the alternative to trying to dominate and control our environment and the other subjects. Machado often stresses the need of escaping from the bonds of inherited and usual conceptualizations, as well as from the belief in their objective value, and of accepting the limits of one's own standpoint. In this he coincides with Hegel's criticism to the "concept" (*Begriff*) and with his "absolute spirit": with *the reciprocal recognition of the absolute difference between individuals* and with *pardoning each other each one's particular horizon*. Language is for both no longer a collective system of names of reality, but, like for Humboldt, the always provisional arrival point of the human spirit's constant "work to make articulated sounds able to express ideas."

Some Final Remarks

We human beings are contradictory because we are "speaking beasts."

Speaking is a human behaviour born in practical life and progressively shaped in order to help us not only survive, but also increasingly (or decreasingly) fulfil specifically human goals like being happy, enjoying what we feel to be good or beautiful things, loving beyond sex and reproduction, planning (more or less) sensibly, and dominating our environment and turning it as safe and predictable as possible.

But linguistic consciousness goes far *beyond its pragmatic sense and uses*, to expand the linguistic tool, with its ability to subsume things under categories, up to what in each case seems to be *the utmost 'height' of*

thinking, the most comprehensive ideas about reality and about ourselves. We thus turn our most useful means of controlling our own life into an *abstract aim of 'explaining' whatever is*, and try to retrace it to some ultimate *conceivable* origin.

This is our 'metaphysic instinct,' which leads us to a *complex and contradictory relation with our own speaking*. The simple function of naming things and processes and expressing and interchanging ideas and emotions develops into an overall effort of *subsuming "all that" under abstract categories generated by our words.* Their *meanings* become what *really matters*, and their being *uttered* by single individuals in each case, because of singular reasons and motivations and for singular goals, fades away behind the *appearance of dominating* the whole of reality, and ourselves, with abstractions from life. Our speaking deludes us and suggests its independence from the concrete, as well as our own *exteriority* to whatever we can speak and think about. "All that" (Sanskrit *idam sarvam*, which we translate as "the universe") becomes our 'object,' and we raise ourselves to the status of its 'subject.'

"Being" proves to be in each case an ultimate result of this titanic effort *against our real life and in favour of a phantasy of being the 'masters of the universe.'* We imagine it as a graspable ultimate source and quality of all, and feel to have reached with it some definitive 'explanation' of it, something which is especially clear in Parmenides as well as in the introduction of Heidegger's "Sein und Zeit." Actually, as Hegel and Machado show, what we reach thereby is voidness, fog and darkness.

But our speaking-thinking also allows us to *look through* this delusion and to retrace its origin and consequences. It allows us to become *critical*, to think against the nominalizing and categorizing speaking and to unveil at least some real fundaments of this unrealistic way of understanding ourselves. And to draw theoretical and practical consequences.

Poetry is, or rather can become, the kind of speaking which does not delude itself and opens the mind to a different, less instinctive and more critical self-consciousness. But it took a long time and much effort to fully display this capability of poetic speaking. Our poems on being and non-being show some steps in this process, alternatively dogmatic and critical.

The utmost effort was needed to descend from the total abstraction to the real diversity, from the abstractive escape to a concrete anchoring of our ideas and categories in real life.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* provides an impressive argument against trying to solve real problems with the absolutely abstract (and thus void) opposition of being and non-being. Hegel and Machado develop, in prose and verse, this anti-metaphysical attitude. Hegel builds, through a painstaking criticism of the history of speculative thinking, a whole critical system leading to the "absolute spirit," to the definitive *return to human individuality and absolute difference*, and to understanding our words no longer as names of reality, but as ways of being "*one consciousness for another consciousness.*" Machado expresses in sharp, insight-full poems and in deeply ironical prose and dialogues the full richness of the *reconquered concreteness*, of the "*essential heterogeneity of being.*"

Both Hegel and Machado prove to be able to return to the concrete through the utmost abstraction and its deconstruction. As Machado states: "*para el hombre, lo inmediato consciente es siempre cazado en el camino de vuelta*" ("for humans, the conscious immediateness is always caught when coming back") (688).

Language enables us to abstract, to overlook the "undetermined immediate" (Hegel) and to "proceed" to its increasing organization in increasingly complex systems of categories. Nobody remains in the realm of the immediateness. As soon as we begin to speak, in early childhood, we already organize our life in the words we learn, and our living in the expression habits of our community. We definitely distance ourselves from the direct sensations of 'our' bodies, *feel different from them*, invent the "mind," the "spirit" or the "soul" as the names of our difference from our bodily existence, and go on in this abstractive way until we reach the supreme reduction of everything in an all-comprising, and nothing-containing, "being." Our lives move in the tension between the immediateness of our sensorial and emotional single experiences and the total mediation of the utmost abstraction. The history of Western critical philosophy is the history of *trying to overcome this "tear" within ourselves*, as Nietzsche formulated it; to regain a harmonious balance of abstract thinking and concrete experience, of gathering and controlling the singular

under thinking and speaking categories, and of paying due attention to the factual "heterogeneity" of things and persons.

Poetic language can be the most powerful means of this *return* to the concrete singular, but it only will be such if it is *mediated by prosaic criticism on the negations in which abstraction consists.* Philosophical prose has to accompany poetry, and depending on each author's character the one or the other will predominate. This tension can be noticed clearly in all the texts of my collection: none is purely poetic. All of them represent an effort to reach the liberty of poetic language in order to organize *speculative thinking* beyond the presuppositions and constrictions of prose.

In Machado this tension becomes explicit: he offers his philosophical poetry within a prosaic context, but neither is his prose a conventional one, nor is his poetry 'pure.' His prose is ironic, deliberately contradictory, provocative, and his poetry expresses the real fundament of this peculiar prose, the true conflicts of human consciousness with itself. His prose is often funny despite the seriousness of its subjects, and his poetry comes and goes between the most elementary sensations and the utmost abstractions.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* gives voice, for the first time, to this struggle between abstraction, with its double function of allowing the control of our environment and offering a deluding escape from reality, and an illustrated search of the concrete in realistic, embodied and moving poetry, in order to face our real existential problems, to shape good desires and to allow mankind to conquer its own paradise, that of responsible and intelligent beauty.

Notes:

[i] "Our lives are the rivers / running into the sea, / which is the dying," Jorge Manrique, Spanish poet of the 15th century. "*Coplas por la muerte de su padre,* ca. 1460-70, full text availbable at: www.rae.es/sites/default/files/Coplas_a_la_muerte_de_su_padre.pdf (English translation mine).

[ii] All translations from German originals are mine.

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