

RIEN, RIEN, RIEN

The Alternate Nothing in French Letters and Language-centred Philosophy¹⁾

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Dieser Aufsatz behandelt das französische Konzept des *rien* (Nichts) als eine Alternative zur ‚Nichtigkeit‘. Die unterschiedlichen Adaptionen des Konzepts von der Aufklärung bis zur modernen Philosophie und Avantgarde-Literatur werden im Rahmen einer Begriffsgeschichte verfolgt. Ausgehend von frühen, ironischen und pejorativen Belegstellen entwickelte sich das ambivalente *rien* zu einem eigenen Philosophem, in dem sich literarische Sprache mit philosophischer Argumentation vermischen. Das *Rien* bildete in seinen Rezeptionen eine Herausforderung des konzeptionellen Denkens innerhalb der Philosophie, wobei die vielfältigen Ausprägungen wesentlich erst durch den polyvalenten Charakter des Begriffs ermöglicht wurden.

The essay addresses the French concept of *rien* (nothing) as an alternative to ‘nothingness’. Its diverse uses from the Enlightenment to modern philosophy and avant-garde literature can be studied as items in the history of thought. From ironic and pejorative instances the ambiguous *rien* has developed into a philosopheme that blends literary language with philosophical argumentation. *Rien* has been applied as a notion that defies conceptual thought inherent in philosophy, and this polysemy derives from its ambiguous import.

Qui dit rien déclare par son langage qu’il éloigne toute réalité.
DIDEROT, Encyclopédie

The word *rien* (nothing) has usually been used synonymously with *néant* (nothingness) in French letters and philosophy.²⁾ However, in some sporadic uses, the word has arguably become an alternative concept, or quasi-concept, essentially distinct from nothingness. This *rien* is characteristic of language-centred art movements and philosophical currents which are either alternative or marginal.

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²⁾ For instance, Stanislas Breton argued that the distinction between the two can be disregarded. STANISLAS BRETON, *La pensée du rien*, Kampen: Kok Pharos 1992, p. 118. Most of French philosophy and Western philosophy translated into French does not separate these concepts, cf. JÉRÔME LAURENT and CLAUDE ROMANO (eds.), *Le néant. Contribution à l’histoire de non-être dans la philosophie occidentale*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France 2006.

The distinct use of *rien* derives presumably from the word's etymology. *Rien* traces back to Latin *rem*, the accusative of 'thing', that was in turn adapted to Old French in which *rien* equally denoted a 'thing' or 'being'.³⁾ However, in modern French the word has acquired meanings that cannot be expressed in English without prefixes ('no-thing' or 'any-thing'). One of its fundamental characteristics, which will be examined here, is derived from this evolution: *rien* is an ambiguous word the meaning of which is determined by the context.

Another characteristic this essay focuses on is the anti-metaphysicality of *rien*. Such a *rien* defies Diderot's definition in his *Encyclopédie* (1765), according to which '[Gens] veulent former quelque idée qui leur représente le rien; mais comme chaque idée est réelle, ce qu'elle leur représente est aussi réel' [People want to form some idea of what *nothing* represents to them, but as each idea is real, what it represents to them is also real].⁴⁾ Diderot describes how representation necessarily betrays *rien* by making it 'some thing' instead of 'nothing', but which, at the same time, remains fundamentally inexpressible. Such an approach idealises *rien* as a concept that would be applicable in philosophy. Diderot's approach exemplifies the fact that *rien* is inevitably associated with problems of representation and the limits of language through which it is manifested. Essentially, philosophy would require a non-idealising alternative that does not render 'nothing' into something – such as *rien* in the instances presented below.

This essay offers a concise, but by no means exhaustive, *Begriffsgeschichte* of *rien* in French philosophy and philosophy-oriented literature. In some cases, such as the avant-garde dada movement, *rien* was seminal, but its presence has not been as equally pronounced elsewhere. Hence, only explicit and accepted uses of the word are included here. From its early applications in the eighteenth century, *rien* developed in the twentieth century into an essential concept of a non-idealising philosophy of 'nothing'.

Rienniste: he who believes in nothing

One of the earliest distinct uses of the word *rien* was manifested in the guise of an 'ism'. The term *rienisme* reportedly surfaced in a rarefied after-dinner discussion in 1772, in a fundamentally ambiguous sense. One of the interlocutors, the Benedictine monk dom Deschamps (Léger-Marie Dechamps, 1716–1774), a reputed anarchist and utopist, had developed a form of atheism inspired by metaphysics. He considered that *rienisme* excludes any belief in known doctrines,

³⁾ LÉON CLÉDAT, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue française*, Paris: Bibliobazaar 2009/1923, p. 506.

⁴⁾ DENIS DIDEROT, *Encyclopédie*, in: *Le néant. Contribution à l'histoire de non-être dans la philosophie occidentale*, eds. JÉRÔME LAURENT and CLAUDE ROMANO, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2006, p. 410f., here: p. 410. All translations are by the author.

mais non pas à Rien, à l'existence négative: car c'est la croyance à Rien [...] qui est véritablement le rienisme. [Le] rienisme n'est pas de ne croire à rien: mais de croire à Rien.⁵⁾

but not in Nothing, in negative existence: for it is the belief in Nothing which really is rienisme. Rienisme is not to not believe in anything; but to believe in Nothing.

Deschamps plays with the ambiguity of *rien* by declaring that *rienisme* does *not* proclaim a lack of belief, but rather that one believes in 'Nothing'. However, in this use, the *rien* becomes a concept very much reminiscent of its counterpart, *néant*.⁶⁾ Despite Deschamps's confusion, he paved the way for the later distinct uses of *rien*.

One of the first modern uses of the term *rienniste* is found in Louis-Sébastien Mercier's dictionary *Néologie* (1801). According to his often-quoted definition 'Nihiliste ou Rienniste', the word refers to someone who does not believe in anything.⁷⁾ The neologism *rienniste* is unlikely an original coinage by Mercier, but he was the first to include it in his dictionary. However, a less-quoted entry in the same work, simply titled 'Rienniste', humouristically links nihilism with the power structures embedded in language:

RIENNISTE. Citoyen néologue, hier je fus, avec quelques personnes, obligé de décliner mes nom, prénom et profession: leur dictée fut aussi longue que celle de certains barons allemands. Je me donnai, moi, la qualité de Rienniste; l'homme de loi refusa de l'écrire, prétendant qu'elle existait bien dans le monde, mais qu'elle n'était pas dans le Dictionnaire de l'Académie. Pour lever ses scrupules, j'ose vous prier de donner place à ce mot dans votre Vocabulaire.⁸⁾

RIENNISTE. Neologist citizen, yesterday I was, with some people, obliged to assign my surname, given name and occupation: their dictation was as long as that of some German barons. I assumed the characteristics of a Rienniste; the lawyer refused to write it, claiming that it did exist in the world, but that it was not in the Dictionary of the Academy. To overcome his compunctions, I dare to give a place to this word in your Vocabulary.

⁵⁾ LÉGER-MARIE DESCHAMPS, *Œuvres philosophiques*, tome 2, Paris: J. Vrin 1993, p. 489.

⁶⁾ Regarding the affirmative character of Deschamps's argument, it is not surprising that in another case he called his doctrine *néantisme* rather than *rienisme*. In fact, the latter was later applied to denote a system that '*veut [...] que Dieu ne soit rien; mais [...] ne veut pas que de ce rien il sorte quelque chose*' [wants that God is nothing, but does not want anything to derive from this nothing]. ÉMILE BEAUSSIRE, *Antécédents de l'hégélianisme dans la philosophie française*. Dom Deschamps, son système et son école, Paris: Germer Baillière 1865, p. 190. In this light Deschamps appears as a forerunner of nihilism that entered Western philosophical discourse at the turn of nineteenth century.

⁷⁾ The entry runs as follows: 'NIHILISTE OU RIENNISTE. Qui ne croit à rien, qui ne s'intéresse à rien. Beau résultat de la mauvaise philosophie, qui se pavane dans le gros Dictionnaire encyclopédique! Que veut-elle faire de nous? Des Nihilistes' [NIHILIST or RIENNISTE. Who believes in nothing, who is not interested in anything. Beautiful result of bad philosophy that struts about in the big Encyclopaedic Dictionary! What does it want to make of us? Nihilists]. LOUIS-SÉBASTIEN MERCIER, *Néologie, ou vocabulaire de mots nouveaux*, tome 2, Paris: Moussard & Maradan 1801, p. 143. The entry identifies nihilism with *rien*, but in a derogatory, sarcastic manner. It should, however, be noted that Mercier's definition is not object-based like Deschamps's.

⁸⁾ MERCIER, *Neologie* (cit. fn. 7), pp. 226f.

In order to avoid the exhaustive task of providing his personal information, the narrator, presumably Mercier himself, is ready to assume the role of a *rienniste*, which he rather pejoratively defines in the preceding entry.⁹⁾ The refusal of the official authority to recognise him as a *rienniste* is not only a parody of wearisome French bureaucracy but also a period piece: the term had not yet been sufficiently established to be included in the dictionary of *l'Académie française*. The status and conservative nature of the French Academy is ridiculed by Mercier, because the organ's purpose is to engage itself in matters concerning the French language but it is unable to keep up with the *de facto* language in use. His contempt is evident in the motto of his dictionary: '*La langue va, malgré ses régenteurs*' [Language is, despite of its regents].¹⁰⁾ In fact, in this sense Mercier's use of the term *rienniste* is pioneering. For him, language is an organic entity that is applicable to private and unanticipated uses, such as neologisms.

In this manner Mercier connects the neologism *rienniste* with language. Following Mercier's more familiar definition 'Nihiliste ou Rienniste', the term acquired a pejorative sense in literary aesthetics from the 1840s onwards. For instance, Honoré de Balzac described a literary technique, 'nothingology' (*rienologie*), when he referred to the writing of banalities.¹¹⁾ Hence, *rienniste* (or *riéniste*) came to signify a *pseudo-littérateur*, a hack, who had nothing worthwhile to say. A few years later, Balzac disparaged the *rienniste*, whom he considered as '*le dieu de la bourgeoisie actuelle; il est à sa hauteur*' [The god of the current bourgeoisie, he is at its peak].¹²⁾ It would seem that Balzac's critique was aimed at authors who embellished literature with what he considered as mere eloquence lacking in subject matter. Balzac was a strict literary realist, more closely occupied with the precision of portrayal than any philosophical aspect of the word *rien*. This is to say that in Balzac's derogatory use, *rienniste* is involved with writing and can thus be manifested only from within a literary sphere.

If Balzac's *rienniste* signified a literary hack who did not provide anything of value, what, then, could be a worthwhile action encouraged by *rien*? The word suggests only nothing. Instead of such a question, one should ask what act, if any, can the *rien* perform: what does 'nothing' do? The verb most closely connected with 'nothing' in French is *rienner*.¹³⁾ It is a *hapax legomenon*, the single occurrence of

⁹⁾ In his phrasing, Mercier comes close to associating *rienniste* as someone lacking qualities – such as *Niemand*. See PÄIVI MEHTONEN, 'Pilgrims on the road to nowhere.' Towards a Poetics of Nothingness, in: *Illuminating Darkness. Approaches to Obscurity and Nothingness in Literature*, ed. PÄIVI MEHTONEN, Helsinki: Finnish Academy of Science and Letters 2007, pp. 9–24.

¹⁰⁾ MERCIER, *Neologie* (cit. fn. 7), title page.

¹¹⁾ HONORÉ DE BALZAC, *Ceuvres complètes de Horace de Saint-Aubin*, tome 3, Paris: H. Souverain, 1840, p. 210.

¹²⁾ Balzac refers to 'nothingologist' (*rienologue*), which is synonymous with *rienniste*. HONORÉ DE BALZAC, *Ceuvres complètes de M. de Balzac*, tome 3, Paris: Furne 1843, p. 572.

¹³⁾ First introduced in Heidegger's *Was ist Metaphysik?* (1929), the neologism *nichten* ('nothinging'; German *nichtet* 'noths' or 'nothings') is similar. This verb is an act, and the subject

which is in Barbey d'Aureville's work dating from 1864. He is said to have produced the word particularly for his father, who remained in his room in anguish doing nothing.¹⁴⁾ Even though d'Aureville's use of the verb is quite ordinary, it possesses some specific qualities. The act that *rien* can perform is paradoxical, in between doing and not-doing. It can only erase action, but the erasure is an act in itself. The act is a removal of action, which illuminates the *rien* as a structural in-between. Its single ability is to cancel any activity.

During the latter part of the 19th century, *rienniste* and related terms became conventional and in philosophy they most often referred to materialism. Moreover, their occurrences in literature were usually of a derogatory nature in one way or another. For instance, Gustave Brunet mentions a '*célèbre rienniste des espaces imaginaires*' [a celebrated rienniste of imaginary spaces] who supposedly had authored *Raison des femmes*, a book consisting solely of white pages.¹⁵⁾ Yet, despite such common, uncomplimentary and even misogynist uses, the nothing-related neologisms of the 1800s anticipated the use of *rien* in the twentieth century avant-garde.

Rien – The nothing of dada

The theme of 'nothing' was fundamental in the transnational language-centred art movement dada. It was utilised in the French manifestoes of the movement as a rhetorical and quasi-philosophical device, especially by Tristan Tzara and Francis Picabia.¹⁶⁾ This use has generated interpretations that constrict the *rien* to nihilism.¹⁷⁾ This is to say that the *rien* of dada is examined from within a certain philosophical discourse even though the term is too ambiguous for such restriction.

Accordingly, the nihilism argument is derived from a confusion of concepts. As was noted above, philosophy and philosophical nihilism are occupied with the concept of nothingness (*néant*) instead of *rien*. For instance, consider the

of the action is 'nothing' (*das Nichts*). See MARTIN HEIDEGGER, *Wegmarken*, Frankfurt/M.: Klostermann 1978, p. 113. *Nichten* is problematic because it generates a quasi-existence for 'nothing' even though it cannot, by definition, exist. Although d'Aureville's verb surfaced 65 years earlier, it never assumed a seminal role in philosophy the way *nichten* did.

¹⁴⁾ BARBEY D'AUREVILLE, *Œuvres romanesques complètes. Les diaboliques*, Paris: Gallimard 1966, p. 1100.

¹⁵⁾ Brunet in fact plays with numerous levels of non-existence: the non-existing book free of contents, and imaginary spaces, while the rienniste, who is actually *Niemand*, does not exist. GUSTAVE BRUNET, *Imprimeurs imaginaires et librairies supposés*, Paris: Librairie Tross 1866, p. 107.

¹⁶⁾ Cf. IRIS FORSTER, *Die Fülle des Nichts. Wie Dada die Kontingenz zur Weltanschauung macht*, Munich: M Press 2005. – Richard Sheppard also mentions an unclaimed dadaist, Albert Chemia, who, in Tunis, applied *rien* in his manifesto according to 'standard' dadaist use. See RICHARD SHEPPARD, *Modernism–Dada–Postmodernism*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 2000, p. 285.

¹⁷⁾ This is understandable considering the tendency in mainstream philosophy to identify *rien* with *néant*. *Rien* is more common and colloquial than *néant*, which is a philosophical and theological concept. It is, however, problematic that the German *das Nichts* can be translated as either *rien* or *néant*. For examples, cf. LAURENT/ROMANO (eds.), *Le néant* (cit. fn. 4).

influential philosophies of Bergson and Sartre, or the aforementioned case of Deschamps.¹⁸) *Rien*, for one, is too versatile to be synonymous with *néant*, since it can appear either as an adverb, pronoun (*ne...rien*) or noun. The dadaists often utilised this ambiguity in order to refrain from the philosophical use of language calling for a conceptual *claritas*. Rather, they applied the negative *rien* without a definite article. For instance, Picabia declared that dada itself was

comme vos espoirs: rien
 comme vos paradis: rien [...]
 comme vos religions: rien¹⁹)
 as your hopes: nothing
 as your paradise: nothing
 as your religions: nothing

In addition to the obvious self-negation, Picabia disparages institutional religion and the idea of an afterlife. *Rien* is again harnessed to criticise and ridicule the bourgeoisie (the object of *vos*) characterised by conservativeness and institutions.²⁰) It is reminiscent of Balzac's use of *rienniste* in his depreciation of the bourgeoisie. Even a link to Mercier can be drawn, if one considers the conventional use of language, that is, language as an institution in itself. This point of view emphasises the power structures mediated in language. These structures, in their immediate form, derive from the very institution that Mercier criticised: the members of the French Academy, the concierges of institutionalised language, are known as 'immortals' (*immortelles*).²¹) Picabia criticised a secular institution which obviously had adopted religious attributes and whose 'paradise' would inevitably have been language that is both controlled and unambiguous. However, his use of *rien* is idiosyncratic inside and out: it often lacks contextualisation and, hence, the final outcome is rather colloquial.

From another point of view, Picabia's *rien* can be regarded as an alternative *Lebenskonzept*. In this approach the linguistic qualities play an equally important role, because the *rien* negates positive contents, which leads to a kind of 'suspended uncertainty'.²²) The structural ambiguity of the word is seminal in its conceptual functioning as well. The dadaist use of *rien* abstains from a systematic philosophy of nihilism, because dada did not want to propagate any idea or formulate any ideal.²³) This is evident in the 'Manifeste du mouvement dada' (1920):

¹⁸) For a broader discussion on Bergson's and Sartre's notions of nothingness, see SARAH RICHMOND, Sartre and Bergson. A Disagreement about Nothingness, in: International Journal of Philosophical Studies 15, no. 1 (2007), pp. 77–95.

¹⁹) FRANCIS PICABIA, *Écrits 1913–1920*, Paris: Pierre Belfond 1975, p. 213.

²⁰) Even though it was the subject of their constant scorn, it should be noted that the avant-gardists themselves had often emerged from a petit bourgeoisie background.

²¹) Cf. ÉMILE GASSIER and JULES LEMAÎTRE, *Les cinq cents immortelles*. Histoire de l'Académie française 1634–1906, Paris: H. Jouve 1906.

²²) FORSTER, *Die Fülle des Nichts* (cit. fn. 16), p. 47.

²³) *Ibid.*

Plus de peintres, plus de littérateurs, plus de musiciens, plus de sculpteurs, plus de religions, plus e républicains, plus de royalistes, plus d'impérialistes, plus d'anarchistes, plus de socialistes, plus de bolcheviques, plus de politiques, plus de prolétaires, plus de démocrates, plus d'armées, plus de polices, plus de patries, enfin assez de toutes ces imbécillités, plus rien, plus rien, rien, rien, rien, rien.²⁴⁾

No more artists, no more writers, no more musicians, no more sculptors, no more religions, no more republicans, no more royalists, no more imperialists, no more anarchists, no more socialists, no more Bolsheviks, no more politicians, no more proletarians, no more democrats, no more armies, no more police, no more nations, finally had enough of all this nonsense, no more, no more, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing.

The above rhetoric is obviously anti-institutional and anti-ideological but not anti-idealistic, because, in the manifesto, *rien* becomes a device of negation. This negation does not constitute an alternative system, but it does constitute an alternative: *rien* marks a desire for something else, for something more.²⁵⁾ But how can a conceptual use of language abstain from philosophy? According to Iris Forster, the dadaist application of *rien* is conceptlessness that is still grasped conceptually. She points out that *rien* causes a kind of loss of structural integrity, because the concept adheres to a certain middle (*die Mitte*) between destruction and construction. Hence, it reflects an underlying dadaist attitude – indifference.²⁶⁾ This view epitomises the reluctance of the dadaists to promote any ideology.

However, Forster's approach appears to be a somewhat one-sided and affirmative interpretation of the dadaist *rien*. It should be noted that by repetition, the word loses its meaning and the rhetorical structure of the manifesto becomes obscure. The threefold repetition derives from rhetoric and poses the problem of what is repeated.²⁷⁾ For instance, do the italics in the last clause of the manifesto indicate a change in lexical category? Even if the three *riens* would be nouns, the object they signify is no more apparent than before. Are the *riens* in fact distinct: the *rien* of Deschamps, the *rien* of Mercier and so on? Ambiguity herein makes certainty impossible. In any case, language, in a manner of speaking, takes over and emphasises writing instead of signification. It would seem that there is nothing beyond the mere word, that there, in fact, is no object or referent.

Still, even in this light Forster's formulation of conceptually grasped conceptlessness appears paradoxical. However, Tzara sheds light on the '*véritable portée du rien*' [true meaning of *nothing*] by saying that *rien* can only express itself as a reflection of individuality, which is why *rien* is universally valid only through individual use.²⁸⁾

²⁴⁾ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 46.

²⁵⁾ *Plus rien* signifies either 'no more' or 'more *rien*', that is, 'more nothing'.

²⁶⁾ FORSTER, *Die Fülle des Nichts* (cit. fn. 16), pp. 47, 50.

²⁷⁾ Cf. Gertrude Stein's famed "A rose is a rose is a rose".

²⁸⁾ TRISTAN TZARA, *CŒuvres complètes*, tome 1, Paris: Flammarion 1975, pp. 419f.

The ‘nothing’ that expresses itself only as a reflection of individuality is a somewhat obscure formulation, but it highlights the individual quality of *rien* in Tzara’s use. It is a quasi-concept at best, because it has no universal composition or contents. In other words, *rien* is a non-identity the contents of which are unique to each individual. The quasi-nature of the concept derives from its non-universal character that challenges universalist modernist philosophies. Following Tzara, the ‘individualist’ *rien* was further developed by lettrism, a successor of dada.

Lettrism and nothing: the poetic rien

The founder of the lettrist movement, Isidore Isou, arguably picked up the rhetorics of *rien* from his countryman Tzara. In his debut publication, dating from 1946, Isou wrote that lettrist poetry

s’agit de: [...] concrétiser le silence;
de: écrire le rien.²⁹⁾

deals with: concretising silence;
with: writing the nothing.

Isou means that poetry should be poetry for its own sake rather than serve as a mediator of meaning. This suggests that poetry be no longer confined to syntax and grammar. Accordingly, lettrist poetry appears incomprehensible, consisting of combinations of letters that are reminiscent of permutations akin to those of the medieval Kabbalah.³⁰⁾ Still, *rien* is connected with language even though the poems have nothing to do with words.

For Isou, the *rien* formed a fixed relationship with the limits of language.³¹⁾ Rather than being another concept, it encapsulated the idea of a certain ‘beyond’, which pointed to the inapplicability and insufficiency of institutionalised language. Isou interpreted Tzara’s *rien* as a term signifying the complete devastation of language, whereas he would himself redefine the word in a ‘positive’ sense. This sense is evident in his scheme as follows:

T. Tzara ⇒ (destruction du mot pour le RIEN)

⇓

I. Isou ⇒ (l’arrangement du RIEN – LA LETTRE – pour la création de l’anecdote)³²⁾

²⁹⁾ ISIDORE ISOU, *La dictature lettriste*, Paris: Cahiers de l’Externité 2000/1946, p. 16.

³⁰⁾ See SAMI SJÖBERG, *The Jewish Shtetl Tradition in the Franco-Romanian Avant-Garde. The Case of Isidore Isou*, in: *Europe – Evropa: Cross-cultural Dialogues between the West, Russia, and Southeastern Europe*, eds. JUHANI NUORLUOTO and MAIJA KÖNÖNEN, Uppsala: The University of Uppsala 2010, pp. 132–149.

³¹⁾ Isou did not consider *rien* from the point of view of conceptual historiography, but rather as the result of a certain development in avant-garde literature.

³²⁾ ISIDORE ISOU, *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique*, Paris: Galimard 1947, p. 43.

T. Tzara ⇒ (destruction of the word for the sake of NOTHING)

⇓

I. Isou ⇒ (the arrangement of NOTHING – THE LETTER – for the creation of the anecdote)

The term ‘anecdote’ refers to poetics based on individual letters.³³) Yet the arrangement of ‘nothing’ illuminates Isou’s ‘positive’ interpretation of the term. The motive for *rien* becoming a poetic principle derives from Isou’s theory, according to which individual experiences cannot be universally expressed.³⁴) Hence, the *rien* betokens a cognitive limit beyond which nothing can be expressed by means of conventional language. As Isou maintains, every individual cognitive faculty establishes a distinct subreality that is inconsummerate with shared language.

In order to underline the particularity of an individual, Isou rephrased the aim of lettrist poetry: the task was to ‘*écrire les riens*’.³⁵) By using the plural form, Isou adopts Tzara’s notion of *rien* as an accentuation of individuality. However, in recontextualising Tzara’s *rien* Isou seems to focus only on one of its aspects: his approach portrays Tzara’s *rien* as a nihilist corrosion of language, an effacement of meaning, even though he and Tzara obviously had the same aim concerning the uniqueness and private nature of experience. This is highlighted by the definite article he assigns to Tzara’s *rien*. Isou’s view is reminiscent of the use of *rienner*, the act of erasing positive contents, which does not, for him, allow any further negation but necessitates a turn to the ‘positive’. In this light Isou misinterpreted the dadaist use of *rien* and restricted its ambiguity to a single purpose.

Even though Isou’s *rien* is fixed to language his distinguishing of the term from *néant* is unique. His ethnicity is seminal with regard to his theories of language and ‘nothing’. Hence, religion becomes the definitive watershed concerning nothingness: ‘*le vide, le néant, le non-être=éléments chrétiens*’ [the void, nothingness, nonbeing=Christian elements].³⁶) For Isou, *néant* is something fundamentally Christian that is absent in the Jewish world. In addition, it is the very concept of nothingness applied in Western philosophy that Isou relates to Christianity. Apparently, *rien* was connected to the functioning of language, whereas *néant* was more profoundly metaphysical. In an interview with Frédérique Devaux Isou concluded that

à mesurer [...] au-delà de ce rien, il existe un néant plus vaste, le rien du rien en quelque sorte, [par lequel] l’esprit recouvre ses limites raisonnables[.]³⁷)

measuring beyond this nothing there is a vaster nothingness, a sort of nothing of nothing, by which the spirit recovers its reasonable limits.

³³) See SJÖBERG, *The Jewish Shtetl Tradition* (cit. fn. 30), p. 145.

³⁴) ISOU, *Introduction* (cit. fn. 32), pp. 12ff.

³⁵) *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³⁶) ISIDORE ISOU, *Agrégation d’un nom et d’un messie*, Paris: Gallimard, 1947, p. 283.

³⁷) FRÉDÉRIQUE DEVAUX, *Entretiens avec Isidore Isou*, Charlieu: Bartavelle 1992, p. 30.

In this sense Isou's argument is still sober-minded. Nothingness is something that cannot be known, whereas *rien* is manifested as hesitation, ambiguity and indeterminacy. However, he suggests that it would be possible to proceed past the *néant* or *rien* in order to perform a 'penetration into the unknown'.³⁸⁾ The utopian character of this notion became fundamental in lettrism and suggests that *rien* is regarded as potentially unstable.

Such indeterminacy was essential, because lettrism sought to proceed beyond the rigid logic introduced by Hegel's philosophy.³⁹⁾ Isou was indisputably an anti-rationalist, particularly when Hegel's dialectics was at issue. During and following the Second World War some of Isou's contemporaries were critical of Hegelian philosophy, not least due to its rigorous use of the terms *rien* and *néant*. Thinkers critical of Hegel such as Maurice Blanchot, Georges Bataille and Emmanuel Levinas all applied *rien* distinctively in their philosophical and literary works.

The indeterminate post-war rien

Even though the theories of Levinas, Blanchot and Bataille are distinct, their criticism is informed by a certain mutual proximity. These thinkers often reflected and discussed each other's ideas in an undeclared manner.⁴⁰⁾ Their philosophies cannot be described as coming together, but rather as meeting. Nevertheless, the *riens* of Levinas, Blanchot and Bataille have individual nuances, but their often fragmented use of the word becomes more lucid once the three are examined in comparison with each other.⁴¹⁾

³⁸⁾ ROLAND SABATIER, *Le lettrisme: les créations et les créatures*, Nice: Z'éditions 1989, p. 36.

³⁹⁾ In the French translation of Hegel's *Wissenschaft der Logik*, *Nichts* is translated as *rien*. However, in Hegel's thought this *rien* denotes the absence of a given thing, making it comparable to Sartre's use of nonbeing. *Rien* as absence is a rather awkward conception from the point of view examined in this essay but speaks for its diversity of uses. For a further discussion on the Hegelian *rien*, see PHILIPPE GROSOS, *Critique de la raison pure, remarque sur l'amphibolie des concepts de la réflexion*, in: *Le néant. Contribution à l'histoire de non-être dans la philosophie occidentale*, eds. JÉRÔME LAURENT and CLAUDE ROMANO, Paris: Presses universitaires de France 2006, pp. 430ff.

⁴⁰⁾ In Blanchot there is a more or less manifest conversation going on between Bataille and Levinas, whose works reciprocally refer to Blanchot. See PHILIP BEITCHMAN, *I am a Process with no Subject*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida 1988, p. 260. Overarching characteristics of their philosophies are the themes of unknowing and incompleteness, manifested by Bataille's *non-savoir*, Levinas's concepts *autre* and *il y a*, and Blanchot's notion of *écriture*. The unknowing reflected by these concepts is definite unknowing in the sense that it cannot be cognised (known). Hence, all three can be regarded as, if not straightforward anti-Hegelians, at least critical of his philosophy. For a further discussion, see JOSEPH LIBERTSON, *Proximity. Levinas, Blanchot, Bataille, and Communication*, Hague: Martinus Nijhoff 1982; – OUTI ALANKO-KAHLUOTO, *Writing Otherwise than Seeing. Writing and Exteriority in Maurice Blanchot*, PhD thesis, University of Helsinki 2007.

⁴¹⁾ A definite comparison of their philosophies is nevertheless impossible within the limits this essay.

Their analyses of *rien* focus on the conceptual and metaphysical characteristics the word possesses. It is therefore not surprising that the distinction of *rien* and *néant* is a somewhat congruent feature in their philosophies. As Bataille states:

Le néant est pour moi la limite d'un être. Au-delà des limites définies – dans le temps, dans l'espace – un être n'est plus. [...] La transcendance de l'être est fondamentalement ce néant.⁴²⁾

For me, nothingness is the limit of being. Beyond the defined limits – in time, in space – a being is no more. The transcendence of being is fundamentally this nothingness.

The *néant* is what lies beyond the limits of being that is defined by presence. In other words, *néant* is what transcends being. Bataille grasps the concept as a fundamentally metaphysical denominator.⁴³⁾ Accordingly, *néant's* metaphysical emphasis was the main reason for abandoning the term. As the three thinkers distanced themselves from 'unproblematic' metaphysics and conceptual thinking, they resorted to 'nothing' in all its ambiguity. As Blanchot illuminates:

Le néant est encore trop proche de la matière et de la pensée. Le mot RIEN me semble d'avantage convenir.⁴⁴⁾

The nothingness is still too close to matter and thought. The word NOTHING seems to provide a convenient advantage.

For Blanchot, *rien* is more convenient than its metaphysical counterpart. However, the most profound clarification of the predilection for *rien* is provided by Bataille:

Inutile de dire que ce RIEN a peu de chose à voir avec le néant. Le néant, la métaphysique l'envisage. Le RIEN dont je parle est donnée d'expérience, n'est envisagé que dans la mesure où l'expérience l'implique. Sans doute le métaphysicien peut dire, lui, que ce RIEN est ce qu'il envisage s'il parle de néant. Mais tout le mouvement de ma pensée s'oppose à sa prétention, la réduit à RIEN. Ce mouvement de ma pensée veut qu'à l'instant où ce RIEN devient son objet, il s'arrête, il cesse d'être, laissant la place à l'inconnaissable de l'instant. Bien entendu, j'avoue d'ailleurs que ce RIEN je le valorise, mais le valorisant je n'en fais RIEN.⁴⁵⁾

Needless to say, this NOTHING has little to do with nothingness. Nothingness, metaphysics envisaged. The NOTHING which I speak of is given in experience, is envisaged only insofar as experience implies it. Without doubt the metaphysician can say that this NOTHING is what he envisages if he speaks of nothingness. But the movement of my thought opposes his pretence, the reduction to NOTHING. This movement of my thought wants that at the very moment when this NOTHING becomes its object, it stops, it ceases to be, leaving room for the unknowable of the moment. Of course, I moreover confess that by this I valorise the very NOTHING, but by valorising it I do NOTHING to it.

⁴²⁾ GEORGES BATAILLE, *CŒuvres complètes*, tome 6, Paris: Gallimard 1970, p. 202.

⁴³⁾ Which Western philosophy, according to Levinas, has treated like an ontological category instead of a true anti-concept. See EMMANUEL LEVINAS, *Dieu, la mort et le temps*, Paris: Grasset 2002/1995, p. 82.

⁴⁴⁾ MAURICE BLANCHOT, *Misère de la littérature*, Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1978, p. 30.

⁴⁵⁾ GEORGES BATAILLE, *CŒuvres complètes*, tome 8, Paris: Gallimard 1976, p. 259.

What Bataille especially highlights is the experiential nature of *rien*. It also marks a certain limit, but this limit does not mark transcendence in the same sense as *néant*, but rather the limit of language. For Bataille, the experientiality of *rien* defies conceptual thinking. The problem is how can such ineffable experience be expressed? Unlike Isou, who developed imaginary and private signs to overcome a similar dilemma, Bataille, for one, demands a dissolving of categorical thinking that requires a re-evaluation of language. The radical ambiguity of *rien* serves this aim.

Yet for Bataille, *rien* seems to remain a concept, even though he sought to redefine it in a manner that would not render it compatible with philosophical discourse. As Bataille stopped short, Levinas succeeded in this enterprise. He applied *rien* to designate an ambiguous ‘nothing’: *rien* defies conceptualisation and in this sense it is truly ‘nothing’. The *rien* differs from *néant* in that it is ‘nothing’ as an ‘*ambiguïté du néant et de l’inconnu*’ [ambiguity of nothingness and the unknown].⁴⁶ Hence, the *rien* conceals itself by failing to be identical with the form in which it presents itself.⁴⁷ As Martin Kavka notes, the Levinasian *rien* appears ‘within the order of that which is essentially cognizable (the same) as that which is exterior to it’.⁴⁸ As it cannot be made into an object of thought, the *rien* signals the impossibility of grasping the present moment, the instant Bataille points to, as complete. This is to say that the *néant* marks the ontological limits of being, as Bataille articulated, whereas *rien* marks a lack within being, presence, and the ‘same’. By the same token, the *rien* is not cognisable in itself, but rather exhibits the inability to capture the presence of the present.⁴⁹ Levinas regards *rien* as this: a truly elusive ‘nothing’ that Western philosophy has failed to consider. It is a radical openness that cannot be assimilated into the ‘same’.

This openness marks the overlapping of two distinct discourses. In introducing *rien* into his work, Levinas simultaneously introduces literary language to the field of philosophy. Literary language is not constrained the way the language of metaphysics is. Within Levinas’s philosophical discourse, the *rien* is an anomaly, an intrusion of the literary into philosophical discourse. However, the *rien* is not simply a figure that dislocates its object like a metaphor, but rather it marks the figuralisation of language in general. It is an instance of what Blanchot called, precisely, literary language.

For Blanchot, literary language puts the significative capabilities of language into question. Writing is presented against a backdrop of nothing, because it is a ‘*rupture avec le langage entendu comme ce qui représente, et avec le langage entendu comme ce qui reçoit et donne le sens*’ [rupture with language understood as that

⁴⁶) LEVINAS, Dieu (cit. fn. 43), p. 92.

⁴⁷) EMMANUEL LEVINAS, *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l’extériorité*, Hague: Martinus Nijhoff 1961, p. 192.

⁴⁸) MARTIN KAVKA, *Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004, p. 181.

⁴⁹) *Ibid.*

which represents, and with language understood as that which receives and gives meaning].⁵⁰) Words as lexical markings can be repeated independently and, in the end, they are devoid of signified contents. Accordingly, in Blanchotian writing, a word is a non-identity lacking subjective definitions: writing is fundamentally exterior to the subject. For Blanchot the '*idéal de la littérature a pu être celui-ci: ne rien dire, parler pour ne rien dire*' [ideal of literature could be this: to say nothing, to speak in order to say nothing].⁵¹) By returning to *rien* as a negative, Blanchot wants to say nothing. Simultaneously, this negative formulation preserves the *rien* not by saying 'nothing' but by clinging to its ambiguity. Later Blanchot described the centrality of this unstable and fleeting word: '*Rien, c'est qu'il faut: supporter l'insupportable rien*' [Nothing, that is what is needed: to bear the unbearable nothing].⁵²) For him, the *rien* is at the same time an insupportable burden and an unavoidable necessity. The *rien* is an instance of the literary that appears unbearable or even impossible when introduced in philosophical discourse.

It seems that none of the aspects of *rien* – its ambiguity, uncognisability and unknowability – can be supported by the language of philosophy. As such, *rien* is always characterised by a certain openness, an escape or a retreat. A Bataille scholar eloquently summarises the position of this indeterminate quasi-concept as follows:

Rien: la permanence des éclats du rire, le sommet sans déclin, la droite sans la gauche. La folie, le mysticisme ou la violence – toutes formes de fuites.⁵³)

Nothing: the permanence of bursts of laughter, the summit without decline, the right without the left. Madness, mysticism and violence – all forms of escape.

The *rien* becomes itself a vehicle that performs the evasiveness inherent to Bataillean unknowing. It evades dialectical thinking by being able to resist the establishing of categories. Blanchot and Levinas utilise it the same way: to hinge categorical and conceptual thinking together by introducing the literary in the philosophical. As a result, *rien* presents itself as a non-idealising philosopheme because of its non-identity with itself.

Conclusion

The concept of *rien* has been subject to multiple uses that range beyond the scope of this essay. However, a non-idealising approach to nothing is what unites

⁵⁰) MAURICE BLANCHOT, *L'entretien infini*, Paris: Gallimard 1971, p. 390.

⁵¹) MAURICE BLANCHOT, *La part du feu*, Paris: Gallimard 1949, p. 314. The theme of 'saying nothing' is an important feature in late modernist literature and the philosophy of the so-called linguistic turn. For instance, cf. SAMUEL BECKETT, *Nouvelles et textes pour rien*, Paris: Editions de Minuit 1958; – JACQUES DERRIDA, *Comment ne pas parler: Dénégations*, in: J. D., *Psyché. Invention de l'autre*, Paris: Galilée 1987, pp. 535-595.

⁵²) MAURICE BLANCHOT, *Le pas au-delà*, Paris: Gallimard 1973, p. 177.

⁵³) JEAN-MICHEL HEIMONET, *Le mal à l'œuvre. Georges Bataille et l'écriture du sacrifice*, Marseille: Editions Parenthèses 1986, p. 103.

the notions examined above. *Rien* has been applied as a device that defies conceptual thinking inherent to philosophy and these multiple uses were made possible by the ambiguous character of the word. The *rien* has the ability to undermine philosophical statements by questioning their precision. As Levinas noted, *rien* cannot be identical to what it refers to. This intrusion of the literary into the philosophical, literary language, along with its flexibility, proves to be the foremost means of communicating and discussing the idea of nothingness.

In the twentieth century the dadaist *rien* paved the way for later applications of the word. It has its place in both aesthetic as well as philosophical discourse. However, the lettrist *rien* appears as an alternative, or a sidetrack, to the manner in which Bataille, Blanchot and Levinas utilised the term. Isou forgoes language, and his *œuvre* is situated between visual poetry and French philosophy at the time. In Bataille's, Blanchot's and Levinas's use the *rien* is particularly distinct from mainstream French philosophy from the mid-twentieth century to the 1970s. Even though current recognition of the three philosophers is unquestionable, *rien* has not become a tool in philosophy or comparative literature. Using it would be a non-violent means of interpretation useful when literature and philosophy become concerned with nothingness – even though, in the light of the above-mentioned cases, literature seems to have developed more convenient ways to overcome the limitations of representation.