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AUGUSTINE ON THE 'NIHIL': AN INTERROGATION

How does one conceptualise 'nothing'? What is 'nothing'? What do we mean when we speak of the 'nothing'? Is 'nothing' really anything at all? If 'nothing' haunts, disrupts and deconstructs us, does this imply that it is 'something' or is it, after all, nothing and is it this very nothingness that bothers us? Do we really mean anything when we speak of 'nothing'? Is anything conveyed or do we merely engage in idle chatter or, indeed, in nothing at all?

At one time, such questions would have been dismissed (and still may be by some) as frivolous ephemera, mere sophistry, questions that are really non-questions or just games played with words. But for those philosophers writing in the wake of Nietzsche, questions of the 'nothing' have become urgent, obsessive even. Nietzsche's evocation of the 'nihil' has haunted philosophers - and, increasingly, theologians - down to the present day. Far from being peripheral, the 'nihil' has become central, defining our contemporary thought and, even, our cultural condition. To appreciate why this is the case, we need to understand how, for Nietzsche, the 'nihil' is inextricably linked with God. The 'nothing' does not appear from 'nowhere' but is, in effect, the trace of the death of God. When God departs, the 'nihil' spontaneously emerges, even if, like God, it emerges without ever 'appearing'.

Our most contemporary obsessions are, however, rarely new. Far from being a distinctively postmodern preoccupation, it is clear that questions of the 'nihil' likewise haunted the pre-modern mind. The episteme of the latter was, of course, theological rather than nihilistic, but pre-modern theologians were more mindful of the nihil than their modern successors who, on the whole (and in the interests of the whole), tended to repress it. Augustine, in particular, spent a great deal of his intellectual life wrestling with the idea of the 'nihil' and probing its multitudinous ramifications.

Augustine and Nietzsche are unlikely bedfellows; indeed, for many they are polar opposites. But for all their differences, they were agreed on the inextricable connection between God and the 'nihil', a connection that pulled them apart as much as it brought them together. Although Augustine could not, of course, even have contemplated the notion of the death of God, he nevertheless concurred with Nietzsche in his conviction that without God, the 'nihil' would spontaneously (re-) emerge. If God were to cease his continuous activity of conservation, the world would lapse into nothingness. Whether Augustine was

anticipating Nietzsche or Nietzsche was echoing Augustine, it is clear that for both, God is that which alone guards against the advent of nihilism. It may further be said that Heidegger was only too aware of this unstated complicity, arguing that Nietzsche's nihilism brought to a close the circular movement of Western metaphysics that began with theology. For Heidegger, the task of thinking was to disclose new possibilities beyond that of theology on the one hand and nihilism on the other, which are complicit in their belonging to the movment of ontotheology.[1]

Unexpectedly in one case and more predictably in the other, both Augustine and Nietzsche have become postmodern icons. For postmodern and continental philosophers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, the haunting presence of Nietzsche is unmistakable. Meanwhile, for those who interpret postmodernism as a prelude to the recovery of a theological neo-orthodoxy, Augustine has emerged as their patron saint. Put bluntly, the nihilists have Nietzsche while the theologians have Augustine. But can we not imagine permeation and crosscurrents within and between these so-called opposites? Indeed, just as postmodern theologians have been learning some of Nietzsche's lessons, perhaps also postmodern nihilists may learn something from Augustine. Even more daringly, perhaps, transgressive readings of both thinkers may help to dislodge the very opposition between nihilists and theologians. In this article, I attempt to contribute to that task by re-considering what Augustine has to say about the 'nihil' and, in particular, the latter's relation to God. As such, this will not be a simple exposition of Augustine's view of the 'nihil'. Rather, it will be an experimental and transgressive endeavour in which I read Augustine's texts 'against the grain', finding in them a number of things that would no doubt surprise him. For all his insistence on the unfettered priority of God, I suggest that one can discern in his texts a much more postmodern and differential relationship between God and the 'nihil'. In other words, we shall be led to ask: is the 'nihil' possible without God and is God possible without the 'nihil'?

How, then, does Augustine conceptualise 'nothing'? What is 'nothing'? What does Augustine mean when he speaks of the 'nothing'? Is 'nothing' really anything at all? If 'nothing' haunts, disrupts and deconstructs Augustine, does this imply that it is 'something' or is it, after all, nothing and is it this very nothingness that bothers him? Does Augustine really mean anything when he speaks of 'nothing'? Is anything conveyed or does he merely engage in idle chatter or, indeed, in nothing at all?

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In order to understand Augustine's conception of the 'nihil' we must turn to his accounts of creation in particular, where the concept gets its most extended treatments. Indeed, Augustine wrote on and developed the doctrine of creation

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[1] For detailed discussion of this, see Laurence Paul Hemming, 'Nihilism: Heidegger and the Grounds of Redemption' in John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 91-108.

at length at various points in his life. By the time Augustine developed his thinking on creation, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* had become the accepted and orthodox Christian account.   Furthermore, this doctrine was an explicitly Christian one.   For as Tarsicius van Bavel points out, the concept was 'unthinkable for Greek philosophers [who held that] out of nothing, nothing can originate'.[2] Theophilus of Antioch was the first Christian writer to give explicit arguments in favour of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, which van Bavel usefully summarises as follows: '1) If not only God but matter also were uncreated, as held by the Platonists, God would no longer be the creator of everything and the only Lord; 2) If matter were uncreated and unchanging, it would be equal to the immutable God; 3) If God had created the world out of preexisting matter, that would be nothing special; for human beings also can produce something new out of existent matter.'[3]   Theophilus' arguments were obviously found to be persuasive because all later Christian writers accepted the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* as the definitive Christian teaching on creation. Furthermore, the doctrine was also thought to be of crucial importance in safeguarding what Rowan Williams identifies as being at the heart of Augustine's accounts of creation, namely, a simultaneous defence of *both* God's transcendence over the world *and* his inextricable connection with it.[4]   Again, as van Bavel puts it, the Church Fathers 'unanimously emphasize that God has willed the world freely. Because He willed it there is proximity; because He made it out of nothing there is distance.'[5]

The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was therefore one inherited by Augustine, although he undoubtedly gave it a more extended treatment and developed its detail to a much greater extent than any of his predecessors. The occasions for these treatments were extended commentaries on the accounts of creation found in the opening books of Genesis, of which it is generally held that Augustine wrote five over a period of around thirty years.[6] As the title of the first of these

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[2] Tarsicius van Bavel, 'The Creator and the Integrity of Creation in the Fathers of the Church, Especially in Saint Augustine', *Augustinian Studies* 21 (1990), p. 4. Van Bavel gives a succinct summary of the background to and origins of the doctrine of 'creation out of nothing' on pp. 4-6, to which I am indebted in this paragraph.

[3] Ibid., p. 4.

[4] 'Continuity and discontinuity between God and creation are....very hard to pull apart in Augustine's thought. The continuities, the ways in which creation shares in the sort of life that is God's, steer us inexorably back to the fundamental difference.' Rowan Williams, '"Good for Nothing?" Augustine on Creation' *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994), pp. 15-16.

[5] Van Bavel, 'The Creator and the Integrity of Creation', p. 5.

[6] These were: *On Genesis against the Manichees* (*De Genesi contra Manichaeos*), *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis: An Unfinished Book* (*De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*), books eleven to thirteen of the *Confessions* (*Confessiones*), the twelve books of *On Genesis Literally Interpreted* (*De Genesi ad litteram*) and book eleven of *The City of God* (*De civitate Dei*). These works were all written (along with numerous other works) between 388 or 389 and around 420. See Roland J. Teske, 'Introduction' to *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, Vol. 84: St Augustine on Genesis* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), pp. 3-4. Elsewhere, Teske further identifies the opening section of *Contra adversarium logic et prophetarum* (419-21) as a sixth possible source of Augustine's

works, *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* makes clear, Augustine's writings on creation were to a large extent motivated by a desire to overturn the teachings of the Manichees, a religious group to which he had once belonged. For one thing, the Manichees were fond of ridiculing what they perceived to be the anthropomorphic conception of God found in the Old Testament - especially in the creation accounts - and Augustine was determined to respond to these misinterpretations. But perhaps more importantly, he was committed to repudiating the all-pervading *dualism* between the Principles of Light and Darkness that lay at the heart of the Manichaean worldview. These two principles were primordial and preceded the existence of the visible world which came into being as a result of the invasion of the realm of Light by the realm of Darkness. Thus, good and evil are held to be two separate and substantive principles or substances in the world pertaining to the realms of Light and Darkness respectively.[7] The result of this is that there is a whole realm of being in the visible world that is outside of God's realm of Light, and it is this that Augustine finds particularly objectionable. For the inevitable corollary of this Manichaean worldview was that God's sovereignty over the world was not absolute in the way that Christianity insisted it was, for the world contained a principle of Darkness that was independent of and in opposition to God's realm of Light.

In the *Confessions*, Augustine considers this worldview and the fact that he had once shared it: 'I believed that evil....was some....kind of substance, a shapeless, hideous mass, which might be solid, in which case the Manichees called it earth, or fine and rarefied like air. This they imagine as a kind of evil mind filtering through the substance they call earth. And because such little piety as I had compelled me to believe that God, who is good, could not have created an evil nature, I imagined that there were two antagonistic masses, both of which were infinite, yet the evil in a lesser and the good in a greater degree.'[8] In order to overcome this, it was necessary for Augustine to come to see that *all* of creation - without remainder or reserve - is created by, participates in and is sustained by God. If this was the case, then the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* could scarcely be avoided and, indeed, it became the fundamental basis upon which Augustine undertook to repudiate Manichaean dualism. For the doctrine that God created all things out of *nothing* meant first, that there was no pre-existent primaeval matter that was in any way co-eternal with God; secondly, that everything that exists in the visible (and invisible) world was created and sustained by God; and thirdly, because it is inconceivable that anything created by God could be

account of the Genesis creation narratives. See Roland J. Teske, 'Genesis Accounts of Creation' in Allan D. Fitzgerald (ed.), *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 380-81.

[7] See N. Joseph Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo and the Theology of St Augustine: The Anti-Manichaean Polemic and Beyond* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), chapter 1. Here, Torchia gives a detailed account of the Manichaean cosmogony based on two main sources: the *Liber Scholiorum* (c. 790-92) of the Nestorian Bishop Theodore bar Khoni and the *Fihrist* or *Catalogue of the Sciences* (c. 988) of Ibn Abi Ja'kub an-Nadim.

[8] Augustine, *Confessiones*, V: 10. *The Confessions*, tr. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 104.

anything other than good, it therefore follows that evil as such does not *exist* but is rather simply the privation of good.[9] Thus, outside of God's sustaining power and sovereignty, there was literally *nothing*.

But what exactly does Augustine mean by 'nothing' and what role does the concept play within his doctrine of creation? In particular, what is the ontological status of the 'nihil'? In other words, is the 'nihil', in spite of being nothing, still in some sense 'something'? At certain times, Augustine's response to this question can appear to be ambiguous. One source of possible confusion has been the question of the 'formless matter' out of which it is said that God created the world. For as well as insisting that God created the world out of nothing, Augustine was also wont to claim that God created the world out of 'formless matter'. The reason for this, as Roland J. Teske has explained, is that Augustine was constrained to ensure that various and diverse scriptural assertions were interpreted in such ways as to make them consistent with each other. For example, 'in Wisdom 11:18, where his version of the Bible followed the Septuagint, Augustine read that wisdom created the world from unformed matter, so that he had to interpret Genesis 1:2 as referring to such matter in a language more suited to ordinary people.'[10] Thus, Augustine had simultaneously to claim *both* that God created out of nothing *and* that God created out of formless matter: 'First there was made confused and formless matter so that out of it there might be made all the things that God distinguished and formed.'[11] He goes on to say that 'therefore, we correctly believe that God made all things from nothing. For, though all formed things were made from this matter, this matter itself was still made from absolutely nothing....Almighty God did not have to be helped by anything that he had not made so that he could make what he wanted. For if something that he had not made helped him to make those things he wanted to make, he was not almighty, and that is sacrilegious to believe.'[12]

It is clear, therefore, that Augustine makes a definite distinction between 'formless matter' on the one hand and the 'nihil' on the other. Elsewhere, Augustine clarifies the ontological distinction between the two, saying that this formless matter was 'in an intermediate stage between form and non-existence, some formless thing that was next to being nothing at all.' Furthermore, he says

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[9] As Augustine puts it, 'whatever is, is good; and evil, the origin of which I was trying to find, is not a substance, because if it were a substance, it would be good....So it became obvious to me that all that you have made is good, and that there are no substances whatsoever that were not made by you.' Ibid., VII: 12, p. 148. Drawing out the implications of this Augustine continues, 'For you [God] evil does not exist, and not only for you but for the whole of your creation as well, because there is nothing outside it which could invade it and break down the order which you have imposed upon it.' Ibid., VII: 13, p. 148.

[10] Teske, 'Genesis Accounts of Creation', p. 380.

[11] Augustine, *De Genesi Contra Manichaeos*, I: 5: 9. 'Two Books On Genesis Against the Manichees' in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, Vol. 84: Augustine on Genesis* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), p. 57.

[12] Ibid., I: 6: 10, pp. 57-8.

that 'it was nothing and yet something, or that it was and yet was not. Whatever it is, it must have been there first, able to be the vehicle for all the composite forms which we can see in the world.'[13] Thus, we begin to see the emergence of a hierarchy of being. If the created world is suspended between God and the 'nihil', so the 'formless matter' out of which the visible world was created is suspended between that world (something) and the 'nihil' (nothing). It is clear, however, that whatever has any form of existence, including the 'formless matter', has been brought into being by God out of nothing.

Even allowing for the fact that Augustine's 'formless matter' is not to be confused with his conception of the 'nihil', however, other commentators have still suspected that Augustine's 'nihil', far from being ontologically 'nothing', is actually 'something', some form of substance, roughly equivalent to the Platonic conception of *hyle*. Robert J. O'Connell, for instance, says that Augustine's conception of the 'nihil', particularly in his early writings, comes 'uncomfortably close to the Neoplatonic non-being (*me on*)' and the quasi-existence which Poltinus attached to that notion.'[14] Ludwig Koenen, on the other hand, as Joseph Torchia points out, 'proposes that Augustine's conception of the *nihil* assumes the character of an *aliquid*, along with the negative qualities of Manichaean *hyle*. Koenen further observes that [the] Augustinian *nihil* takes on almost the quality of being, just as [formless] matter is designated as a "near-nothing" (*paene nihil*).'[15] Torchia himself, however, says that 'such interpretations must be approached with reservation', although he concedes that 'Augustine does exhibit some inconsistencies in his treatment of the *nihil*', which no doubt may give rise to the sort of interpretations propounded by O'Connell and Koenen.[16] The most striking example of this is to be found in *De Beata Vita*, where Augustine describes the 'nihil' as 'whatever is flowing, dissolving, melting and - so to speak - perpetually perishing'.[17] Commenting on this, Torchia says that 'while this

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[13] Augustine, *Confessiones*, XII: 6, pp. 283-84. It should be noted that although Augustine says of this formless matter that 'it must have been there first', this should not be understood in a strictly temporal sense. As Augustine says elsewhere, 'But we must not suppose that unformed matter is prior in time to things that are formed; both the thing made and the matter from which it was made were created together.' And again, he says, 'It is not in the order of time but in the order of causality that matter unformed and formable, both spiritual and corporeal, came first in creation. It was the substratum of what was to be made, although it did not exist before it was created.' *De Genesi ad Litteram* 1: 15: 29 and 5: 5: 13, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis Vol. 1*, tr. John Hammond Taylor, *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation No. 41* (New York: Newman Press, 1982), pp. 36 and 154. See also *Confessiones*, XIII: 33.
[14] Robert J. O'Connell, *St Augustine's Early Theory of Man, AD 386-391* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1968), p. 187. Quoted in Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, pp. 130-31, n. 80.
[15] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, p. 131, n. 80. Torchia refers to Ludwig Koenen, 'Augustine and Manichaeism in Light of the Cologne Mani Codex', *Illinois Classical Studies* 3 (1978), p. 159.
[16] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, p. 113.
[17] Augustine, *De Beata Vita* 2: 8. Quoted by Roland J. Teske in a translator's note in *St Augustine on Genesis*, p. 58, n. 38. This passage is also quoted by Torchia in *Creatio ex nihilo*, p. 113.

definition suggests a deficiency or lack of stability, it does not really designate absolute non-being. Only that which has some ontological status can "flow," "dissolve," "melt," and "steadily perish".'[18]

But such a characterisation is so contrary to Augustine's many other characterisations of the 'nihil' as absolute non-being and, therefore, as ontologically 'nothing', that most commentators prefer to view this passage, and other occasional passages like it, as slips or aberrations arising from the inherent difficulty of conceptualising pure nothingness. Teske, for instance, points out that 'the idea of nothing was not an easy one to come by, especially for a Platonist who views being in terms of permanence and stability.'[19] And Torchia similarly says that such language 'can be attributed to the impossibility of adequately describing what is completely non-existent.'   He says that Augustine's clear and repeated metaphysical distinction between being and non-being should preclude us from laying too much interpretative weight upon such relatively rare indications of a 'substantial' conception of the 'nihil' on Augustine's part.[20] Instead, we should remember that Augustine, much more characteristically, defines the 'nihil' as 'that which was entirely nonexistent'.[21] And, even more explicitly, in a discussion of the opening verses of John 1, he berates those who interpret 'nothing' as 'something': 'Now we must not heed the raving of individuals who think that "nothing" in this passage is to be taken as "something", and who think that they can compel assent to this sort of nonsense on the ground that nothing is put at the end of the sentence.'[22] Perhaps more important, however, is the fact that whole sense of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* depends on the 'nihil' being conceived literally as nothing, as no form of substance or quasi-substance, and as having no ontological referent whatsoever.

Far from simplifying matters, however, Augustine's unambiguous denial that the 'nihil' is 'something' (in spite of occasional suggestions to the contrary on his part) actually complicates them. For now we are presented with the further difficulty, as we have already intimated, of how we are to conceptualise something which, precisely because it is nothing, eludes conceptualisation. Difficult though it may be, Augustine certainly does attempt such conceptualisation. What is particularly revealing and intriguing about this, however, is the manner in which this is done. For he does not, on the one hand, conclude that 'nothing', precisely because it is 'nothing', is scarcely worthy of further elucidation, discussion or conceptualisation, given that nothing meaningful can be said about 'nothing'. Neither, on the other hand, does he invoke the utter heteronomy and horror of 'nothing' with respect to God and

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[18] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, p. 113.
[19] Teske, *St Augustine on Genesis,* p. 58, n. 38.
[20] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, pp. 113 and 114.
[21] Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram*, 7: 5: 7, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis Vol. 2*, tr. John Hammond Taylor, *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation No. 42* (New York: Newman Press, 1982), p. 6.
[22] Augustine, *De Natura Boni Contra Manichaeos,* 25. Quoted in Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, p. 178.

God's creation, a strategy ruled out, presumbaly, by his anti-Manichaean conviction that even 'nothingness' must somehow be brought within God's all-embracing sovereignty. Rather, Augustine assigns the 'nihil' a role in his dramatic theological schema. The 'nihil' is brought within and 'positioned' within Augustine's theological metanarrative. In other words, the 'nihil' appears to be *domesticated* theologically and, as such, re-appears in Augustine's texts time and again. Although, for Augustine, God has 'overcome' the 'nihil', such 'overcoming' never seems to be entirely accomplished and the 'nihil' continually re-appears as God's domesticated 'other'. Furthermore, the 'nihil' is (negatively) evaluated, it is (theoretically) capable of re-asserting itself and it is constantly threatening to pull human beings back down into nothingness. The 'nihil' in other words has not been banished or eradicated (nothingness has not been unproblematically overcome), but neither can its absolute heteronomy be contemplated, and so the 'nihil' appears in Augustine's texts as an absence that is nonetheless controlled, positioned and domesticated by God.

I now want to consider some examples of this. We have already observed that, for Augustine, God is the supreme fullness of Being, the corollary of which is that 'being' itself is good. This means that everything that exists is good precisely because everything that exists was created by and participates in God. Thus, Augustine claims that 'all the things which God made are very good; natural things are not evil.'[23] And again, he says that 'Existence as such is good, and supreme existence is the chief good.'[24] If this is the case, however, then it is perhaps to be expected that nothingness or non-being would be equated with corruption, evil and death, which indeed turns out to be the case. Furthermore, this is what enables Augustine to explain why creatures have a tendency toward corruption and evil, even though they have been created by a good God. For the Manichees, of course, this question was much less problematic. The origin of evil in the world is to be found in the self-sustaining realm of Darkness, and therefore God's goodness remains untouched and uncontaminated by the presence of evil, for which he is in no way responsible. By denying the existence of evil as a positive reality, Augustine had rescued the supremacy and sovereignty of God from its encroachment by an oppositional and co-equal force or substance. At the same time, however, Augustine had to confront the problem of how the world, which was good by the very fact of its existence, could admit the presence of evil or, rather, the absence of good.

It was in answer to this challenge that Augustine found himself, once again, invoking the concept of the 'nihil'. He said that it was because creatures were created out of nothing that they have a natural tendency toward corruption and evil. Their creation by God may explain the fact that they are good, but the fact that they were created out of nothing likewise explains why they have corruptible natures. The corollary is obvious: goodness comes from God, while

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[23] Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram Imperfectus Liber*, 1: 3, 'On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis: An Unfinished Book' in *St Augustine on Genesis*, p. 146.

[24] Augustine, *De Vera Religionae*, XVII: 34 - XVIII: 36, quoted in Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, p. 116.

evil and corruption come from the 'nihil'. As Torchia puts it, 'In Augustine's articulation of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* we find a sharp distinction between being and non-being: being is correlative with goodness, and non-being is inextricably bound up with the corruption or privation of existent natures. Such ontological deficiency constitutes an evil, but an evil which does not exist in its own right'[25] Thus, the 'nihil', far from being literally nothing, about which nothing meaningful may be said, actually plays a crucial and indispensable role in Augustine's account of the world, its being, its creation and its relationship to God. It is that which accounts for the world's corruptibility and tendency toward nothingness and it continues to make its haunting 'presence' or 'absence' felt in the undoubted 'presence' of evil in the world, a 'presence' which is itself an 'absence'.

There are two important conclusions to draw from this, therefore: first, far from being nothing, about which - precisely because it is nothing - we can do no other but remain silent, the 'nihil' is unambiguously evaluated as an evil. Indeed, not only is it itself evaluated as evil, but it is the cause and explanation of all evil in the world. Secondly, God's creation of the world does not banish, overcome or destroy the 'nihil'; rather, as we shall consider in more detail, the 'nihil' is always hovering in the background, waiting to re-assert itself should God cease his continuous act of conservation. Furthermore, the 'nihil' actually does re-assert itself wherever evil is to be found within the world. Consequently, we begin to suspect that the 'nihil' is being expected to play too large a role in Augustine's drama of creation for it to be pure nothingness. On the other hand, we also begin to suspect that the 'nihil' is playing too small a role in Augustine's texts for it to be the threatening heteronomous 'other' of God. The pure nothingness of the nihil (whether banished or threatening) has been domesticated into playing an indispensible role in a creation drama directed by God.

This suspicion has, in fact, been explicitly voiced by Brian Rotman, whose comments here are highly pertinent. In order to understand Augustine's distinctive disposition toward the 'nihil', he contextualises the emerging thought of the early Christian church by taking us back to its hellenic heritage: '....the Greek reaction to the void, characterised by unease, fear, and horror, was one of psycholoigcal denial. Within the full indivisible universe of Being there could be no fissure, absence, hole or vacuum; the void did not exist, it could have no being, it was not.'[26] Had Augustine followed Greek thought in this respect, he would have been constrained to claim that the world was uncontaminated by absence, that the 'nihil' had been unambiguously banished, that the 'nihil' was, quite simply, without qualification or reserve, nothing. And yet we have seen that Augustine does not follow this route. Instead, the 'nihil' plays an indispensable role in his understanding of the world, its creatures and God's relationship to both. Rotman suggests that this was because the Greek negation

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[25] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, p. 117.

[26] Brian Rotman, *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1987), p. 63. I am most grateful to my colleague Dr Paul Fletcher for referring me to this text.

of nothingness was inconsistent with the Christian account of creation *ex nihilo* which implied that the 'nihil' had some sort of positive role to play, thus forcing the early Christian theologians to conceive of 'nothing' as something. One would wish to qualify Rotman's account at this point by saying that although he is right to point out that Augustine's theological conception of the 'nihil' is, in fact, an avoidance of pure nothingness, we have nevertheless seen that Augustine has unambiguously denied that the 'nihil' is 'something'. It thus seems that the concept bears witness to a haunting presence/absence that is *between* 'something' and 'nothing'.[27]

Rotman explains further: 'St Augustine, though he absorbed the God of Parmenides and Plato and their abhorrence of the void through the neo-Platonist writings of Plotinus and not from Aristotle, assigned an eschatoloigcal status to 'nothing' - it was the devil - which neatly Christianises the sort of horrific object Aristotle was at such pains to deny.'[28]   On Rotman's reading, therefore, Augustine's philosophical predisposition was to deny the void in favour of the fullness of being, but finding himself theologically constrained to work within the Christian account of creation *ex nihilo*, he did the next best thing which was to domesticate or Christianise the 'nihil'. Hence, the substantive role we have seen Augustine to have ascribed to the nihil - as that out of which the world was created, that which continually threatens to pull creatures back into nothingness, that which is the source of all evil and so forth. But this, of course, raises the further question of whether the 'nihil', thus conceived, is really 'nothing', or whether, on the other hand, it constitutes a denial of nothingness. Again, Rotman suggests the latter. He says that 'this attempt to negate the problem of "nothing", by a formulaic transfer of Aristotle'[s] horror of the void onto God's transformative overcoming of it, was more of an avoidance of the void than any real engagement with a sign signfying no thing.'[29] So Augustine's Christianised and domesticated concept of the nihil constistutes a denial of the nihil rather than an engagement with it. Or, alternatively, we may say that Augustine's conception of the nihil constitutes a *repression* of the nihil.

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[27] It is necessary to sound a note of caution here for the language we are using is remarkably close to the language we have seen Augustine himself to invoke in order to clarify the ontological status of the 'formless matter' out of which God created the world. But although the language is the remarkably similar, the meaning is strikingly different. For the 'formless matter' spoken of in the creation accounts is neither something nor nothing in the sense that it stands at a *mid-point* between the two. The 'formless matter' stands on a spectrum or continuum between nothing and something. On the other hand, when speaking of the role the concept of the 'nihil' plays within Augustine's writings as falling between nothing and something, I am rather suggesting that it is neither unequivocally nothing nor unequivocally something. The 'nihil', it seems, is between nothing and something in the sense that it escapes that very opposition rather than falling at a mid-point between the two (even though, of course, Augustine himself wants to claim that the 'nihil' is unequivocally nothing).

[28] Rotman, *Signifying Nothing*, p. 63.
[29] Ibid., p. 64.

In the wake of psychoanalytic thought, however, we have learned that the mechanism of repression is never total. The very means by which the repression is enacted also bears witness to that which is being repressed. The 'manifest' text itself harbours the key through which the 'latent' text - that which has been repressed - may be accessed. Thus, we may well suspect that Augutsine's texts themselves manifest the traces of that which they are repressing, the traces of the 'nihil' as the absolute other - absolute absence as opposed to God's absolute presence. Indeed, if we allow Augustine's repressive censor to be relaxed, we see that his own texts bear within themselves, and thus lend themselves to, an alternative, more theologically transgressive reading of the world as the effect of an interplay between presence and absence - between the absolute presence of God and the absolute absence of the 'nihil'. Indeed, we have already observed that within Augustine's texts, the 'nihil' is always hovering in the background as a haunting presence that is never quite present or, alternatively, as a haunting absence that is never quite absent. In spite of Augustine's claims that God's activity of creation and conservation establishes presence and abolishes absence, things are not quite so straightforward. The presence that God's creation establishes seems to be always haunted by the absence out of which it was brought. I now want to expose these traces more explicitly by turning to two forms of thought which Augustine did not himself hold but to which he sometimes hovered close.

The first of these is *occasionalism*. Occasionalism, as Richard Sorabji has well characterised it, 'turns all causation into forms of creation, and gives a sense, not merely, like Berkeley's theory, of the dependence of the world on God, but of its precariousness. The theory can be illustrated by saying that the dye does not cause the cloth to become black. Rather, its presence merely provides God with the occasion for making the cloth black, so that, at least on the strictest version of the theory, all causal power is reserved for God.'[30] As Sorabji points out, Augustine is not a proponent of occasionalism, even though Malebranche acknowledges him 'as a source of inspiration for his own occasionalism'. Instead, Augustine adopts an alternative strategy for safeguarding God's causal and creative power, namely, 'by making everything depend for its continuation on God.'[31] This, of course, is the doctrine of divine conservation, whereby if God were to cease his continuous and ongoing conservative activity, which is what holds creatures and creation out of nothing, they would immediately collapse back into the nothingness out of which they were brought. The doctrine of conservation is intimately bound up with Augustine's doctrine of creation, as is evident when he says that 'the power and might of the Creator, who rules and embraces all, makes every creature abide; and if this power ever ceased to govern creatures, their essences would pass away and all nature would perish.'[32] Thus, creatures, precisely because they are created out of nothing, have a natural

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[30] Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum: Theories in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (London: Duckworth, 1983), p. 297.
[31] Ibid., pp. 302 and 303.
[32] St Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram*, 4: 12: 22, p. 117. Sorabji quotes from this passage in *Time, Creation and the Continuum*, pp. 303-4.

tendency toward non-being; they have nothing inherent to themselves which allows them to continue in being. The fact that they do continue to exist is due solely to the fact that God is continuously conserving and sustaining them. As Torchia puts it, 'in Augustinian terms, whatever is created from nothing is contingent, mutable and oriented toward non-being'.[33]

Thus, we can see why, as Sorabji has asserted, Augustine's doctrine of conservation is one alternative way to occasionalism of conserving the world's dependence upon God. But we can also see why it also gives a sense of the world's precariousness. For Augustine's image is of a world precariously balanced between God (being) and the 'nihil' (non-being), precisely because the world is created *by* God (being) *out of* the 'nihil' (non-being). In so far as creatures are created out of nothing, they have a natural tendency toward non-being, but in so far as they continue in being, they do so only because of God's ongoing conservative activity which prevents them from falling back into nothingness. This returns us to the point with which I began this discussion, namely, that far from being conquered, eradicated or banished, the 'nihil' is overcome only in so far as God continues with his ongoing conservative activity. God is unable to leave creatures to their own devices, because if he were to do so, the 'nihil' would immediately and spontaneously re-assert itself. As Augustine says, 'When a builder puts up a house and departs, his work remains in spite of the fact that he is no longer there. But the universe will pass away in the twinkling of an eye if God withdraws His ruling hand.'[34] It seems, then, that God's activity of conservation is merely reactive. The 'nihil' is the 'natural' state of affairs, it will ordinarily prevail unless God intervenes to ensure otherwise. This leads one to question whether God or the 'nihil' has conceptual priority here. Are we beginning to see glimpses here of a 'nihil' that is not contained and domesticated by God but a 'nihil' that is radically other than God, a 'nihil' that is in some sense God's rival?

This point is made even more explicitly when we turn to the second teaching (or heresy) to which Augustine comes close, namely, that of *annihilationism*, as Nick Land has made clear. Annihilationism arose out of an apparent contradiction or at least tension between the necessity of God's conservation for the continued existence of all things on the one hand and the eternal damnation of those souls that are not saved on the other. For souls to be eternally damned, it is clear that they must eternally exist. Now, if this is the case, it must be the result of one of two possibilities: either all souls must be naturally immortal or else God must be continually maintaining these souls in existence purely for the sake of their eternal and never-ending torture and punishment. The former possibility is clearly ruled out by the doctrine of divine conservation which we have been considering. It is inconceivable that any created thing (i.e. anything at all other than God) could be naturally eternal, and therefore if souls are to be damned eternally, this must be because God preserves them in being for the sake of their eternal damnation. The only other possibility here would be to deny that God

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[33] Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo*, p. 152.
[34] Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram,* 4: 12: 22, p. 117.

does in fact sustain them in being, with the result that such souls would simply fall into non-being, that is to say, they would simply cease to exist. As Nick Land says, 'this is the extreme heresy of annihilationism, later to be associated with the Socinians (who were rigorously persecuted for it) and the Arians.'[35]

Land concentrates his discussion upon Aquinas, whom he thinks 'demonstrates intellectual and literary powers far outstripping those of Augustine'[36], although it should be said that Aquinas's writings on these matters are entirely consistent with Augustine's teachings on creation and conservation which we have been considering. To return to the contradiction or tension that gave rise to the annihilationist heresy, Land says that Aquinas, confronted with this quagmire, 'insists upon the (limited) plausibility of the annihilationist case. He divides his argument into stages, first affirming God's power to annihilate, and only then denying that this power is in fact exercised by a benevolent being'.[37] Thus, in the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas says 'just as before things existed God had the power of not giving them existence, and thus of not creating, so also once they are created he has the power of not continuing to uphold them in existence; they would then cease to be. That is annihilation [Quod est eas in nihilum redigere].'[38] Thus, Aquinas affirms the logical possibility of annihilation and affirms that God does indeed have the power so to annihilate. This, as we have seen, is entirely consistent with Augustine's teaching that God's continuous creative act of conservation is what holds creatures in existence, without which they would fall back into the nothingness out of which they were made.

Once again, however, it seems that all of creation is suspended between God and the 'nihil': created by God and therefore sustained in being, but created out of nothing, and therefore inherently oriented toward nothingness. The created world itself, therefore, is *between* the presence of God and the absence of the nihil. God creates a world that is not unproblematically present (as God himself is) but which is constituted by an interplay between presence and absence, between God and the 'nihil'. The creation of the world, therefore, far from banishing the 'nihil', actually depends on its haunting presence/absence. The 'nihil', in other words, is a condition of the world's possibility *as* the world. For only God is uncontaminated by the 'nihil'.   Thus, Land says that the heresy of annihilationism 'clarifies the fundamental impetus of Judaeo-Christian monotheism as no other doctrine can. This God is the antagonist of zero, and therefore the fortress of identity, personality, individuation. To be exiled definitively from such a God - to lose his protection - is to relapse into indivisible non-being; de-created into the *nihil*.'[39]

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[35] Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 100.

[36] Ibid., p. 99.

[37] Ibid., p. 101. This, of course, gives rise to the somewhat paradoxical conclusion that it is God's benevolence that ensures the damnation of unredeemed souls for eternity. As Land puts it, 'eternal damnation as the sentimentality of God'.

[38] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Vol. 14*, tr. Thomas Gilbey (London: Blackfriars, 1964), p. 49. Quoted in Land, *Thirst for Annihilation*, p. 101.

[39] Land, *Thirst for Annihilation*, p. 102.

What we see emerging here, therefore, is a theological schema in which God and the 'nihil' are opposites, a more radical schema than the one where the 'nihil' is domesticated by God. Now God and the 'nihil' appear to be heteronomous opposites, between which there is an undecidable priority. The world, in many ways, appears to be an effect of this very undecidability. God is the 'fortress of identity', the 'antagonist of zero', which is to say, the antagonist of the 'nihil'. Though created by God, the world seems to be forever haunted by the spectre of the 'nothing' that is never completely banished. Because they are created out of nothing, the world and creatures always tend toward nothingness into which they would fall if God were to cease sustaining them. Their corruptible and sinful nature likewise springs from their nihilistic origin, an origin that forever haunts them and indeed constitutes them as finite corruptible beings. The world, it seems, is not simply the work of God, does not unproblematically embody his presence but is, on the contrary, as much a creation of the 'nihil' as it is of God. The world, as we have noted, appears to be 'suspended' between God on the one hand and the 'nihil' on the other. This is why Land graphically speaks of God and the nihil squabbling over creation 'as jealous rivals fight over a shared lover'.[40] If this is the case, the world bears witness not simply to the presence of God but also to the absence of the 'nihil' precisely because it is itself constituted by *both* the presence of God *and* the absence of the 'nihil'. The co-mingling, the interplay and interaction of God and the nihil, of presence and absence is what makes the world what it is, is a condition, in effect, of its very possibility. In other words, the created world does not embody God's triumph over the 'nihil' but rather God's connivance with it. In this connivance, God's ontological priority is compromised as God colludes with his 'other' and thereby brings the world into being.

As a result, however, and as if often the case with such opposites, God and the 'nihil' appear to be more mutually implicated and more proximate than one would initially believe. For this co-constitution of the created world means that, on the one hand, God is never entirely present and, on the other hand, that the 'nihil' is never entirely absent. Thus, the possibility of God's total presence becomes an impossibility and as God's presence becomes impossible, God begins to withdraw without ever completely disappearing. Consequently, it is not entirely clear how God's presence is to be distinguished from God's absence. Conversely, within the created world, the possibility of the nihil's total absence becomes an impossibility. This is because if the nihil were completely absent, God's presence would be fully established and this would be, in effect, the end of the created world. As the overcoming of the nihil is never finally effected, the nihil begins to emerge, to make its (quasi-)presence felt, without ever completely appearing. On this reading, therefore, the world becomes an effect of the interplay between presence and absence, in which the possibility of pure presence as well as the possibility of pure absence become impossibilities. From the point of view of the world, God becomes impossible without the 'nihil' and the 'nihil' becomes impossible without God. Just as both are the conditions for

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[40] Ibid., p. 101-102.

the possibility of the world, so from the point of view of that world, each is impossible without the other. Furthermore, when the impossibility of God's presence means that he withdraws and (almost) becomes absent and when the impossibility of the nihil's absence means that it emerges and (almost) becomes present, it becomes clear that far from being opposites, God and the nihil become proximate, they almost become one.

Transposed into conceptual or theoretical terms (as if we have not already been conceptual or theoretical enough), this has important implications for the question of the very possibility of both theology and nihilism. If the world is constituted by an interplay between presence and absence, God and the 'nihil', then neither theology nor nihilism *alone* will be adequate means of understanding that world. If God's total presence is as much an impossibility as nihilism's total absence, then both theology alone and nihilism alone likewise become impossibilities. Just as the world is 'suspended' between God and the 'nihil', so our theoretical challenge is to articulate a mode of thought that is *neither* theological *nor* nihilistic, that is itself suspended between theology and nihilism. Indeed, this very reading of Augustine's writings on the 'nihil' may be regarded as one preliminary and modest contribution to this ongoing theoretical task. By reading Augustine's texts 'against the grain to discern the points at which thought is constructed by excluding or repressing alterity'[41], we have found that Augustine has an important contribution to make to the development of such a theoretical task. A transgressive reading of Augustine may well have much to teach us about our contemporary cultural episteme and its possibilities (and impossibilities) for envisioning both God and the 'nihil'.[42]

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[41] Mark C. Taylor, 'Postmodern Times' in Orrin F. Summerell (ed.), *The Otherness of God* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), p. 189.

[42] I am very grateful to my colleague Dr Paul Fletcher for his insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper.