The Poetics of Nothing: Jean Passerat's 'De Nihilo' and its Legacy

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Abstract

On 1 January 1582 the poet and scholar Jean Passerat (1534–1602) sent a gift to his patron Henri de Mesmes: a poem in Latin hexameters about nothing ("De nihilo"). It became a literary sensation, prompting, over the next decades, a long and varied sequence of poetic and prose responses in Latin and vernacular languages by various authors competing to out-do Passerat, and one another, in ingenuity. Why did this poem catch the imagination of so many as the sixteenth century turned into the seventeenth? This article offers the first complete account of the 'Nothing' phenomenon, as it passed between multiple languages, literary genres and cultural contexts. It traces its dissemination via networks linked to institutions of learning, to academies and salons, to patrons and to coteries of poets. Focusing on the French context in particular, it then goes on to argue that the literary and political significance of these texts is greater than has hitherto been recognized.

> *What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is a*
> *book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external,*
> *which would be held together by the internal strength of its*
> *style, just as the earth, suspended in the void, depends on noth-*
> *ing external for its support...*
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> Gustave Flaubert, letter to Louise Colet, 16 January 1852
> (trans. Francis Steegmuller)

On 1 January 1582 the poet and scholar Jean Passerat (1534–1602) sent a poem
to his patron Henri de Mesmes (1532–1596), as he had done every year since
1570 and would continue to do until 1596, when the sequence was ended by the
patron's death.[1] The practice of *strenae* or *étrennes*—poems sent as gifts on
New Year's Day—was a long-established one, and widespread in Renaissance
France.[2] Passerat's gift on New Year's Day 1582 was a poem of 70 Latin hexam-
eters about nothing ('De nihilo'). It became a literary sensation, prompting,
over the next decades, a long and varied sequence of poetic and prose respons-
es, in Latin, French, Greek, and other languages, sometimes in bilingual and
mixed-language presentations, by various authors competing to outdo Passer-
at and one another in ingenuity. Several of these were collected in 1596 and
1597 in mixed-language print editions with the enigmatic title *Nihil. Nemo.*
Aliquid. Quelque chose. Tout. Le moyen. Si peu que rien. On. Il.[3]

The trend was not confined to France. In addition to the pieces by French
poets collected in 1596/7, a host of admirers of Passerat's *jeu d'esprit* from the
German-speaking lands and the Low Countries also composed responses to
the sequence—poems, parodic *disputationes*, and treatises—in localized
bursts of activity during the first three decades of the seventeenth century.
Translations of Passerat's poem appeared in French, English, and Polish.[4] In

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1   For a succinct account of Passerat's life and works, see Julia Haig Gaisser, 'Jean Passerat', in
    P. O. Kristeller et al., eds, *Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum* (Washington, 1992), 7:
    276-8, with François Rouget, 'L'entrée en scène d'un humaniste provincial: Jean Passerat,
    poète troyen (1553–1564)', *Seizième Siècle*, 13 (2017), 399–416. He had taught Ronsard and Baïf
    at the Collège de Boncourt in the 1550s. Henri de Mesmes made Passerat tutor to his son, and
    he lived in the de Mesmes household from 1570. In 1572 he was made Professor of Latin Elo-
    quence at the Collège Royal, a post he held until 1597, when he was struck down by paralysis
    and blindness. The subjects of Passerat's previous poems to de Mesmes included 'Umbra'
    ('Shade', 1578), 'Pavus' ('Peacock', 1579), 'Aura' ('Breeze', 1580), 'Nugae' ('Trifles', 1581); they are
    collected in *Kalendae Januariae* (Paris: Mamert Patisson, 1597).
2   Mathilde Vidal, 'Quelle Renaissance pour la renaissance de l'étrenne? Problèmes de périodi-
    sation autour d'un genre poétique', *Réforme, Humanisme, Renaissance*, 86 (2018), 97–109.
3   All quotations from these poems, with page references, will be to the following compiled edi-
    tion: *Nihil. Nemo. Aliquid. Quelque Chose. Tout. Le Moyen. Si Peu Que Rien. On. Il.* (Paris, 1597).
4   The first English translation, by William Cornwallis (d. 1614), appeared in *Essayes of certaine*
    paradoxes (London, 1616). For other seventeenth-century English imitations of Passerat, see

1661, nearly eighty years after its composition, Passerat's poem even received the dubious honour of a quite lengthy (and quite tedious) commentary by the Dutch scholar Martin Schoock (1614–1669), who published it together with Charles de Bovelles's (1479–1566) Neoplatonic philosophical treatise *De nihilo* (1511) and his own *Tractatus de nihilo*. Why did this poem catch the imagination of so many as the sixteenth century turned into the seventeenth? Is this curious episode of literary history, easily dismissed as a product of the baroque interlude between humanism and neoclassicism, worth taking seriously?[5]

My contention is that it is, for three reasons. The first is that the readers and writers of these texts took it seriously. Literary games of this kind were serious business in the Renaissance: *serio ludere* was a concept that informed much of the writing of this period, as any reader of Erasmus or Rabelais well knows. And the vogue in the wake of Passerat's Nothing was so long-lasting that its significance must not be underestimated. The second reason is that Passerat's poem, and those of the poets who contended with him, have value as reflections on contemporary rhetoric and poetics, insofar as they treat ideas about style, imitation, and authorship. The third reason concerns the wider significance of the phenomenon of paradoxical writing in the early modern period. The 'nothing' paradox is in many ways the purest expression of this impulse, and it was seen as having theological, moral and political, and scientific significance, inspiring reflections on everything from the names of God to the symmetry of snowflakes, from the Wars of Religion to the very concept of Creation.

Paul Baines, 'From 'Nothing' to 'Silence': Rochester and Pope', in Edward Burns, ed., *Reading Rochester* (Liverpool, 1995), 137–165 (141–3). The Polish translation (1636) was by Daniel Naborowski (1573–1640): Bielak and Sadzik read Naborowski's poem as a synthesis of the two 'phases' of the 'Nothing' phenomenon, the first being Passerat's poem and its offshoots, the second the more philosophical 'querelle' of the 1630s (Alicja Bielak and Piotr Sadzik, 'W nurcie pochwał Niczego. *Cień, Róża, Kur, Kalendy styczniowe* Daniela Naborowskiego jako przekłady utworów Jeana Passerata', *Prace Filologiczne. Literaturoznawstwo*, 5 (2015), 17–49).

5   Passerat's *De Nihilo* has received scant attention from critics: in her study of 'Nothing' in French Renaissance literature, Barbara Bowen relegated Passerat to a footnote, and made no mention of any of the texts inspired by Passerat's poem ('*Nothing* in French Renaissance Literature', in Raymond C. La Charité, ed., *From Marot to Montaigne: Essays on French Renaissance Literature = Kentucky Romance Quarterly*, 19 (1972), 55–64). Older studies of Passerat sometimes made brief mention of his 'Nihil': Kathleen Merken dismissed it as 'ingenious foolery' (*Jean Passerat, Poet and Humanist*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis (Berkeley, 1966), 146); she referred to some of the responses, but wrongly attributed all of them to Philippe Girard. Charles Des Guerrois (*Jean Passerat, poète et savant* (Paris, 1856), 74) found Passerat's poem 'assez insignifiant', and had even less to say about its successors. Jean-Claude Margolin's piece 'Le Paradoxe, pierre de touche des 'Jocoseria' humanistes', in *Le Paradoxe au temps de la Renaissance* (Paris, 1982), 59–84 is the most worthwhile thing yet written on Passerat's poem and the French translation of it, but he also misattributed the 'Tout' poem, and was apparently unware of the other poems in the sequence.

This essay offers the first complete account of those texts that were directly inspired by Passerat's poem. I measure the sheer scale of this phenomenon, which spanned multiple languages and literary genres. I trace its dissemination via networks linked to institutions of learning, to academies and salons, to patrons and to coteries of poets,. As the conceit circulated within and between these networks, passing freely between different spheres of learned and literary culture and crossing linguistic and confessional boundaries, it sparked explosions of creativity in diverse genres and fields of learning (poetry, philosophy, science), and formed sequences of dialogue and debate (the poetic contest, the learned disputation, the political polemic). What mattered was not the central idea itself—which was nothing, or almost nothing—but the ways in which the expression of the paradox was formulated and reformulated differently by different communities of readers and writers. In the final part of the essay, focusing on the French context, I offer a closer reading of some of the poetic texts, and argue that their literary and political significance is greater than has hitherto been recognized.

1   In Praise of Nothing

Passerat's poem relies for its effect on a series of equivocations between the pronominal and substantive senses of 'nothing', or rather between its potential to signify both a negative (no-thing) and a positive concept (Nothing): '*Nothing* is more precious than jewels or gold'; 'The Gods fear *Nothing*'; and so on. Most of the poems written in response to Passerat's 'Nihil' play an essentially similar linguistic game, juggling with indefinite, negative, and impersonal pronouns and occluding, or equivocating between, their antecedents or referents. The game of equivocation takes on a different cast as the conceit passes from one language to another. One of Passerat's French translators in a brief note[6] pinpoints the difference in grammatical negation between French and Latin that makes translation impossible, namely that French usually requires two negative particles, which tends to minimize ambiguities. It goes unremarked that there is another aspect of Latin grammar that makes it more amenable to these equivocations: the use of the verb 'esse' to mean both 'is' and 'there is'. Philippe Girard's 'Quelque chose', which on first reading appears to be an imitation of

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6   *Rien. A Henry De Mesmes pour Estraine. Traduict du Latin de Iean Passerat, en françois. Quelque Chose. Tout* (Paris: Etienne Prévosteau, n.d.). One contemporary reader was not at all convinced by the attempt, and jotted in the margin of one copy of this edition: 'ce rien traduict du latin en bon francois ne vaut rien'. The copy is in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (RES-YE-2004); a digitized version can be found at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k722473>.

Passerat's poem that completely misses the point of it, a perverse transformation of a paradox into a banality, is in fact an accommodation of the conceit to a form more suited to the French language—which, in turn, led to the proliferation of Latin poems on 'Aliquid', since the first such poem, by 'P.G.P.' of Moulins in 1597, is in part a translation into Latin from Girard's French.

Passerat was by no means the first to have written a poem playing on the ambiguity of 'Nothing'. The Occitan poet Guillaume de Poitiers (Guillaume IX d'Aquitaine, 1071–1127) had composed a riddle poem about nothing ('Farai un vers de dreyt nien'). There are several parodic sermons on 'Nihil' and 'Nemo' dating from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, including the centonic 'Sermo de nihilo'.[7] The rhétoriqueur poets of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century were enamoured of such poetic games: Mellin de Saint-Gelais (c.1491–1558), for example, wrote more than one short poem in this vein.[8] 'Rien' featured as a character in popular literature, as for example in the early sixteenth-century *Farce joyeuse et récréative à trois personnages, à sçavoir: Tout, Chascun et Rien*.[9] In Italian, there was Francesco Coppetta's (1509–1553) burlesque 'Capitolo di noncovelle' (c.1553).[10] The cognate 'Nemo' tradition had a still richer history.[11]

These previous treatments of the 'Nothing' conceit are, though, less relevant for an understanding of Passerat's poem than is the general Renaissance phenomenon of the paradoxical encomium.[12] Widely practised by humanists

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7   Martha Bayless, *Parody in the Middle Ages: the Latin Tradition* (Ann Arbor, 1996), 164–7.

8   Merken, *Jean Passerat*, 146; L. J. N. Monmerqué, 'Notice bibliographique', in *Farce joyeuse et recreative a trois personnes, a scavoir: Tout, Chascun et Rien* (Paris, 1828), ii–viii.

9   *Ibid.*, and see Bowen, 'Nothing', 60–1, for some other examples from farce and popular literature, as well as an overview of examples from Rabelais (61–3). See also Jan Miernowski, *Signes dissimilaires: la quête des noms divins dans la poésie française de la Renaissance* (Geneva, 1997), 114–119, on Clément Marot's incorporation of the carnivalesque 'Monsieur Rien' into his poetic discourse.

10   Carlo Ossola, ed. *Le antiche memorie del nulla* (Rome, 1997), XI.

11   See Bayless, *Parody*, 57–86, on the parody sermons; Jelle Koopmans and Paul Verhuyck, *Sermon joyeux et truanderie: Villon, Nemo, Ulespiègle* (Amsterdam, 1987) for the 'tradition néminique médiévale', including sixteenth-century print adaptations of the material; Hannes Fricke, *'Niemand wird lesen, was ich hier schreibe': Über den Niemand in der Literatur* (Göttingen, 1998) for a broad overview from Radulphus through to the twentieth century, with particular attention to German and English 'nobodies'.

12   Of the vast literature on the Renaissance paradox, I cite here some key works that treat material relevant to the subject of the present article. Still important is Rosalie Colie's *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton NJ, 1966), esp. 219–51 on the 'problem of Nothing' and 224–5 on Passerat. Also of general relevance are A. E. Malloch, 'The Techniques and Function of the Renaissance Paradox', *Studies in Philology*, 53 (1956), 191–203; Henry Knight. Miller, 'The Paradoxical Encomium with Special Reference to Its Vogue in England, 1600–1800', *Modern Philology*, 53 (1956), 145–178; Silvia Longhi, *Lusus: il capitolo burlesco nel Cinquecento* (Padua, 1983); Annette H. Tomarken,

rhetorically trained in epideictic speech-making and argument *in utramque partem*, the best known examples of the form—Erasmus's Folly, Ulrich von Hutten's 'Nemo', Panurge's praise of debt in Rabelais, Berni's praise of the plague, Pirkheimer's praise of gout—are the tip of the iceberg, as can be seen from a glance at the massive compendium of paradoxical encomia by ancient and humanist authors compiled by Caspar Dornavius (Caspar Dornau, 1577–1632). The two-volume *Amphitheatrum sapientiae Socraticae joco-seriae* (Hanau, 1619) collects over 500 pieces, mostly in Latin, ranging from short poems to longer prose works, including eight on 'Nihil', three on 'Aliquid', seven on 'Omnia', six on 'Nemo', and four on 'Parvi', many of them direct responses to Passerat's 'Nihil'. The compilation concludes (where else?) in More's *Utopia*. Even in the context of the crowded market for games of this type, Passerat's 'Nihil' sparked an explosion of interest among readers who found his treatment to be uniquely witty, elegant, and philosophical—indeed, made it into a foundational text for a new revival of the conceit.

2 The Responses to Passerat's 'Nihil': An Overview[13]

The earliest poetic responses to Passerat's 'Nihil' date from well before its first known print publication (1587): clearly the poem circulated widely in manuscript, and perhaps also in print, before that date. Indeed, its first translation appeared even before the notional date of the poem's presentation to Henri de Mesmes (1 January 1582), in the form of Marie de Romieu's (*c.*1545–*c.*1590) expansive version in French alexandrines (repurposed as an *étrenne* for the Cardinal de Retz and his wife), printed September 1581.[14] In 1583, still well before our first known print publication of Passerat's Latin 'Nihil', the Dutchman Ludolphus Pithopaeus (Lambert Ludolph Helm, 1535–1596) received a copy of it from Daniel Tossanus (D. Toussaint, 1541–1602), his French colleague at the Collegium Casimirianum in Neustadt.[15] Pithopaeus composed in response three Latin elegiac poems, the second of which also incorporates some Greek elegiacs, with the title *The Deification and Nullification of the new-old cornucopia of the Utopian Nothing: exchanged as New Year's Gifts between friends by way*

The Smile of Truth: The French Satirical Eulogy and Its Antecedents (Princeton, 1990); Patrick Dandrey, *L'éloge paradoxal de Gorgias à Molière* (Paris, 1997); David Marsh, *Lucian and the Latins: Humor and Humanism in the Early Renaissance* (Ann Arbor, 1998).

13 An 'Appendix' at the end of this article provides a quick reference chronological list of the texts discussed in this section.

14 See Prosper Blanchemain's note in Marie de Romieu, *Oeuvres poétiques* (Paris, 1878), 138.

15 The college established by Johann Casimir (1543–1592) when Calvinists were expelled from the University of Heidelberg.

of the go-between Mercury the Liberal, a patrician of Benevento.[16] The poems echo and develop many of Passerat's conceits. One of them elaborates a personified Nihil, son of OUDEIS and OUDAMIA, who dwells in UTOPIA, where OUTIS reigns supreme. Another, titled a 'metamorphosis' of Passerat's 'Nihil', simply inverts the central idea: Nothing, from being the best has become the worst, for Nothing is worse than x, y and z.

Around the same time, numerous responses by French poets, in both Latin and French, were starting to circulate: they began to appear in print from 1586–7, and they form a kind of sequence, or ever-expanding poetic contest, since they respond to and name one another as well as Passerat's poem. Many of them were later collected in a 1597 compilation by the Paris printer Etienne Prévosteau (who had also previously printed several of the texts in the sequence in separate editions) and in an edition printed at Caen by the widow of Jacques Le Bas (1596).[17] The 1596/7 editions omit most of the names of the authors of the poems—only Passerat and Theodorus Marcilius (Derick Marcelisz, 1548–1617),[18] the Latin poets, are named, and the third Latin poet, author of 'Aliquid', is designated 'P. G. P. Molinensis'—so that the poems tend to be misattributed in the modern criticism. But there are some clues to authorship within the poems that refer to one another in the sequence, and in some of the separately printed editions of individual poems. The author of 'Si peu que rien' knew the identity of the authors of 'Quelque chose', 'Tout', and 'Le moyen', designating them 'un Vandomois', 'Des Prez', and 'un gentil Auvergnac' respectively. An earlier edition of 'Quelque chose' (Paris: Prévosteau, 1587) names its author as 'Philippes Girard Vandomois'.[19] 'Le moyen' had appeared in a much

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16   'ΑΠΟΘΕΩΣΙΣ ΚΑΙ ΟΥΔΕΝΩΣΙΣ Noviveteris Cornucopiae Nihili Utopiensis, Strenae loco inter amicos mutuo missae per internuncium Mercurium Liberalem Patricium Beneventanum', dated October 1583, Neustadt an der Weinstraße; printed in Molnár's 1614 compilation (*Lusus poetici excellentium aliquot ingeniorum, mirifice exhibentes Neminem, Nihil, Aliquid, Omnia* (Hanau, 1614), 29–40), and later included in Dornavius's *Amphitheatrum*.

17   The title page of the Caen edition closely resembles that of Prévosteau's compilation (with the omission of 'Aliquid'), but the text itself differs, so this is not a falsely dated reprint of Prévosteau 1597 (as might be assumed from the fact that it was Prévosteau who had originally printed several of the poems). There may have been an earlier Prévosteau compilation that formed the basis for the Caen edition. In the latter, 'Quelque chose' (224 lines) differs from both Prévosteau's 1587 and 1597 versions (292 lines); the text of 'Tout' is substantially different from Auvray's 1587 and Prévosteau's 1597 versions, being shorter by about half; and 'Le moyen' has the same text as Prévosteau 1597, which in turn is substantially different from Guillemot's 1588 version.

18   For the identification of the Dutch name, see W. T. M. Frijhoff, 'Niemendalletjes van een Arnhemse humanist: Theodorus Marcilius' *Lusus de Nemine* (1583)', *Arnhem de genoeglijkste*, 19 (1999), 4–11 (5).

19   In this edition, Girard's poem comes with commendatory verses in French, Latin and Greek, including a Latin distich by 'Federicus Morellus Professor et T[ypographus]

longer version in 1588 signed by the initials 'I. M. D. L. G. Auverg.', identified by Roger Patterson as Jacques de La Guesle (1557–1612).[20]

The 1596/7 compilations collect the poems roughly in order of their first appearance in print. Passerat's Latin 'Nihil' seems to have been printed for the first time in 1587, in the Prévosteau edition that also contained Girard's 'Quelque chose'.[21] Theodorus Marcilius's 'Lusus de nemine' had been printed by Denis Du Pré in 1583, and then in a revised version in 1586, the first version having been composed without knowledge of Passerat's poem, the second repurposed as a response to it. Des Prez's 'Tout' had appeared (anonymously) in a 1587 Paris edition printed by Guillaume Auvray. The second French translation of Passerat's 'Nihil' (which differs completely from that of Marie de Romieu) is possibly also from around 1587: Prévosteau collected it with 'Quelque chose' and 'Tout' in an undated edition often bound together with the 1597 compilation, and there is also an undated Lyon edition printed by Benoist Rigaud. 'Le moyen' by the Auvergne poet (probably Jacques de La Guesle) had been printed in 1588, but the version we have in the 1596 and 1597 compilations has been drastically reduced in length, from 816 to 244 lines. 'Aliquid' by the author from Moulins seems to have no edition earlier than 1597.[22] I have found no editions of 'Si peu que rien', 'On' and 'Il' before 1596, but they had certainly been circulating before then, even if only among a small coterie of poets, since they refer to one another. Another poem belonging to this sequence but not collected in the 1596 and 1597 compilations, Jacques de Fonteny's 'Personne', had appeared in a 1587 edition printed by Pierre Hury. Fonteny mentions Passerat and the 'Quelque chose' and 'Tout' poems, and he lards his poem with some unacknowledged borrowings from Marcilius's 'Nemo'.

R[egius] P[arisiis]' (i.e. the younger Fédéric Morel), and a Greek distich signed Θεόδωρος Χριστιανός, i.e. Théodore Chrestien, son of the reformer Florent Chrestien. See Brigitte Jacobsen, *Florent Chrestien: ein Protestant und Humanist in Frankreich zur Zeit der Religionskriege* (Munich, 1973), 36.

20   Roger Patterson, '"Politique" Propaganda and the Paris Parlement: Jacques de La Guesle's *Polimetrie* of 1588', *French Studies*, 45 (1991), 257–268.

21   There was at least one reprint of this edition, since Prosper Blanchemain owned a copy dated 1588. See Blanchemain, 'Philippes Girard Vandomois et Louis Coquelet de Péronne', *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique, Scientifique et Littéraire du Vendomois*, VIIe année (1868), 170–3.

22   Some bibliographies, including the USTC and *French Books III & IV* (Leiden, 2012), 999, list a 1592 edition supposedly held in the Bibliothèque nationale de France: *Januaria sive aliquid pro strenis ad Molinenses* (Paris: Etienne Prévosteau, 1592). The origin of this error is a mistranscription in the catalogue of the BnF: the item is in fact the 1597 edition. I would like to thank Geneviève Guilleminot of the Bibliothèque nationale for checking this on my behalf.

Passerat's poem inspired numerous other texts by French authors not included in the 1597 compilation. In 1594 there appeared Jean Demons's (1567–1604) bizarre *Demonstration de la quatrieme partie de rien*, which is presented as a response to 'Rien', 'Quelque chose', and 'Tout', and which promises to provide the solution to ending the religious conflict by distilling the 'quintessence tiree du quart de rien' by the magical invocation of divine names. This text had been printed by Prévosteau, but he did not include it in the 1597 compilation, for reasons that will become apparent—although the author of 'Si peu que rien' possibly obliquely refers to it. In 1599 Prévosteau also printed 'Le Bonjour' by one 'R. de B.', which is a direct continuation of the sequence collected in 1597, and which stands as the clearest illustration of the game's adoption into salon culture. Théodore de Bèze (1519–1605) included Passerat's poem in his own 1597 *Epigrammata*, and wrote an epigram in response to it.[23] I also mention here a lengthy French heptasyllabic poem 'Rien' by Claude Du Verdier, son of the famous bibliographer, which was published in 1585 by his father, who had found it among his papers. Doubtless many more poems of this nature, loosely inspired by Passerat's 'Nihil' or by the craze it initiated, were produced than survive.

Our next point of reference is in the vicinity of Nuremberg in 1605, where a student of the law professor Konrad Rittershausen (1560–1613) at the University of Altdorf, Johann von Blansdorf of Dresden, dedicated to him a Latin *strena* on 'Omnia', an 'Everything' to answer Passerat's 'Nothing'.[24] This sparked a flurry of poetic exchanges in Latin, including some mind-bending acrostic trickery, between Rittershausen, Theodorus Sizmannus, Georgius Remus, Paulus Chemnitius, and Albert Szenczi Molnár (1574–1634), the Hungarian who

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23   Bèze, *Poemata varia* (Geneva, 1597), 195–198. Passerat in turn included Bèze's epigram in his own 1597 collection *Kalendae Januariae*; and it was often printed together with Passerat's poem in subsequent editions.

24   That Blansdorf's poem was conceived as a response to Passerat's is clear from the way his opening echoes that of Passerat: 'Iane pater, rediens redeuntis Ianitor anni. [...] Undique nam nullum, quod tuto promere possis, / Munus adest: Aliquid video; Nihil undique prodit; / Arida sic rivo promanat paupere vena. / Ergo Nihil donabo? Nihil donare, quid hoc est? / Ergo Aliquid? donans Aliquid donare videtur / Nonne Nihil? [...] forsan si donaro Omnia? credo. / Sic non immerito potero donasse videri' (Father Janus, returning gatekeeper of the returning year [...] there's no gift anywhere that you could safely publish: I've seen a Something; Nothing's coming out everywhere; the flow of inspiration from this paltry stream has dried up. So shall I give Nothing? A gift of nothing, what's that? Something, then? Wouldn't one who gives Something seem to be giving Nothing? [...] What if I were to give Everything? I think so. That way I could be seen to have given generously). Quoted from Dornavius, *Amphitheatrum* (Hanau, 1619), 723. All translations are my own. Other poems in this exchange, for example the 'Eidyllion' of Remus, mention Passerat ('Passer') directly as their inspiration.

later compiled a number of the Latin poems deriving from Passerat's 'Nihil' in an edition printed at Hanau in 1614.[25]

In 1608, Cornelius Götz gave a 'Disputatio de nihilo' at the University of Marburg, incorporating quotations from Passerat's 'Nihil', a performance that prompted epigrammatic responses from the elder Rudolph Goclenius (1547–1628), who presided over the disputation, and from Caspar Sturm (1550–1625) and Georg Thalmüller (1585–1618). The aforementioned Szenczi Molnár, at Marburg from 1607–1611, was presumably in attendance. Götz dedicated the print edition (Marburg, 1608) to Moritz, Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel (1572–1632), a patron who clearly had a liking for compositions inspired by Passerat's poem, since he also received from the Greek-Italian Aemilius Portus (1550–1614)—a new arrival at Kassel in search of patronage—the 'De Nihili antiquitate et multiplici potestate', which was printed in a 1609 Kassel edition together with Passerat's poem. Aemilius Portus took a risk in dedicating his 'De nihili antiquitate' to 'No-one' rather than to his prospective patron; but he could presumably be confident that Moritz would see the joke. Johann Balthasar Schupp (1610–1661), a professor of the University of Marburg, produced in 1639 a satirical Latin prose *strena* in praise of 'Nihil', the much reprinted *Xenium, sive de usu et praestantia Nihili*. It was printed together with Passerat's 'Nihil' and von Hutten's 'Nemo' in a Jena edition of 1694.

There followed other public orations given in German universities in the manner of Götz's 'Diputatio de nihilo'. Jacobus Musselius of Anklam presented his 'Oratio de nihilo' at the University of Wittenberg on 10 October 1624, printed as *Quinta essentia de Nihilo prolata & demonstrata in oratione publica* (Wittenberg, 1624). In response, a student at the University of Leipzig, Benedictus Mauricius of Altdorf, in February 1628 gave an oration in praise of 'Aliquid', stating explicitly that he had taken his cue from Musselius's Wittenberg oration (sig. A3ᵛ). Both orations were printed together with Passerat's 'Nihil' (and Köler's 'Aliquid') in a 1628 Leipzig edition.

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25   This collection, compiled by Molnár at the request of Johannes Matthäus Wackher von Wackenfels, included Passerat's 'Nihil' (with Bèze's epigram) and Marcilius's 'Nemo', along with Ulrich von Hutten's 'Nemo' (with an epigram by Konrad Rittershausen), another 'Nemo' by Grobius, Pithopaeus's 'Nihil' poems, Köler's 'Aliquid', Guillimann's 'Aliquid', the exchange of poems on 'Omnia' involving Rittershausen et al., and a poetic paraphrase of Ecclesiastes 3 by Jacques Lect of Geneva, presented here as a complement to the texts on the theme of 'Omnia'. On Molnár and the edition, see G. Lábos Olga, 'Szenci Molnár Albert Lusus poetici című gyűjteményéről', *Irodalomtörténeti közlemények*, 82.5–6 (1978), 590–6; and *idem*, 'Újabb megjegyzések Szenci Molnár Albert 'Lusus poetici'-jához', *Studia Litteraria*, 17 (1979), 35–49.

Another locus of Passerat-inspired activity was Prague. It centered on Johannes Matthäus Wackher von Wackenfels (1550–1619), whose liking for Passerat's poem is attested by Johannes Kepler; Wackher, who had been a dedicatee of Remus's 'Omnia' in 1605, and for whom Szenczi Molnár would make the 1614 compilation, received from Christoph Köler (1602–1658)—formerly of the University of Altdorf—an 'Aliquid' composed at Prague as a direct response to Passerat.[26] Wackher was himself exercised by Marcilius's 'Nemo' to the extent that he wrote a different ending for it; this was presumably because Marcilius had made such a mess of the praise of his patron (the statesman Pomponne de Bellièvre) at the end of the poem.[27]

Franz Guillimann (1568–1612), a professor at Freiburg, wrote yet another 'Aliquid', printed in a 1611 Freiburg im Breisgau edition together with Passerat's poem and Marcilius's 'Lusus de nemine'. Another mock treatise on the subject of Nothing, the *Asserta veritas genuina Nihili* by the Antwerp clergyman Franciscus Lichtius (François de Licht, 1605–1673) appeared in print in 1642, and had a second expanded edition in 1647.

The trend for *discorsi* on Nothing in the Italian Academies of the 1630s—a dispute conducted with particular intensity in the Venetian *Accademia degli incogniti* in 1634—represents a somewhat separate development: a libertine and sceptical exploration of the 'Nothing' phenomenon. The years 1632–1635 saw the production of a series of such texts, by Giuseppe Castiglione, Luigi Manzini, Marin Dall'Angelo, Raimondo Vidal, Jacques Gaffarel, and Giovanni Villa. Since these texts have no direct connection with Passerat's poem, and given that they have already been the subject of a recent study by Carlo Ossola, which furnishes ample background on the Italian Academic contexts from

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26   'Dum Nihil admiror Pragae, quod Gallicus olim / Incinuit vates divino gutture carmen: / Cui verum Cygni nomen non passeris esset; / Invenit mea Musa Aliquid, Nihilo quoque maius. / Maius enim esse Aliquid Nihilo, schola tota Sophorum / Et ratio, et rerum, mihi crede, fatebitur ordo' (At Prague, admiring Nothing—the poem that the French bard once sang in divine strains, a poet whose true name were Swan, not Sparrow [*passer*: a pun on Passerat's name]—my Muse found Something, greater than Nothing. That Something is greater than Nothing, believe me, all the schools of philosophy, and reason, and the natural order, will concede). Quoted from Dornavius, *Amphitheatrum* (Hanau, 1619), 728.

27   *Lusus poetici*, 16. Marcilius had written: 'But No-one comes to you Pomponius, most praiseworthy of men, whom No-one was bidden to visit in our song. May it happen, No-one, that he flourishes more than you, to the extent that No-one be more dear to his king and to God.' Wackher's suggested rewrite was as follows: 'But what should I wish for you, Pomponius, most praiseworthy of men? Perhaps that you should be able to be better than No-one? Truly, I wish it. But it is already well established that you trust nobody. Give way then, please, to No-one also. Be dear to God: serve your king, and may your name flourish forever in the world. See to it, though, that No-one flourishes more than yourself: let No-one be more pleasing to his king and to God.'

which they emerged, I will not deal with them in the present article.[28] Similarly, the presence of 'Nothing' and 'Nobody' in Spanish baroque poetry, which again represents a development largely distinct from the Passerat-inspired trend, has been recently studied by Rodrigo Cacho Casal.[29]

Most of the poems so far mentioned are *strenae/étrennes* offered to patrons or prospective patrons, following the model of Passerat's dedication to Henri de Mesmes.[30] The 'nothing' conceit, if handled adroitly, was easily assimilable with the rhetoric of modesty and self-abnegation that was essential to dedicatory epistles and poems.[31] At the same time, they are responses to one another in the spirit of *aemulatio*, cumulative additions to an ever-expanding poetic contest. The exchange of *strenae* functions not just as an opportunity for advancement by patronage, but also as a means of forging and consolidating group identities.

An appreciation of this aspect of the *strena* form itself is essential to an understanding of the mechanics of the entire 'Nihil' phenomenon. It is no coincidence that Theodorus Marcilius, poet of one of the most frequently reprinted responses to Passerat, the 'Lusus de nemine', was also the author of a history of *strenae* (*Historia strenarum*, 1596), a work published by none other than Etienne Prévosteau. In a fine example of imitative harmony he couched his *Historia strenarum*—which is itself offered as a *strena*—in the form of a debate: the conceit of the whole work is that its four sections are the competing performances of four 'adolescentes'. In them Marcilius presents, both in playful verse (showing the taste for wordplay that marks his 'Nemo') and in learned prose *orationes* steeped in rhetorical argument *in utramque partem*, the case for and against the practice of *strenae*. The first 'oratio', citing patristic writers and

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28   In addition to the Italian texts, Ossola, *Le antiche memorie*, also includes text and Italian translations for Passerat's 'Nihil', Marcilius's 'Nemo', Girard's 'Quelque chose' and Des Prez's 'Tout' (here misattributed to Girard), and another poem on 'Nemo' (here misattributed to Dornavius, who included it in a 1626 compilation, but in fact by one Felix Wyss of Zurich: *Nemo. Elegia de Nemine Scripta a Felice Wyssio Tig. Helv.* (Heidelberg, 1615)).

29   Rodrigo Cacho Casal. *La poesía burlesca de Quevedo y sus modelos italianos* (Santiago de Compostela, 2003), 217–227.

30   Marcilius's 'Nemo'—which has a springtime setting in the revised version, but which was originally framed as a January *strena*—to Pomponne de Bellièvre; Fonteny's 'Personne' to 'M. de L'Estoille'; Girard's 'Quelque chose' to Monsieur de Guillon, Chevalier, Sieur des Essars; P.G.P.'s 'Aliquid' to the people of Moulins and to Henri iv; the Auvergne poet's 'Le moyen' to Achille de Harlay; 'Si peu que rien' to a 'Senateur' of Toulouse; 'On' to Aymar de Clermont-Chaste ; 'Il' to 'Du Pont' and 'De La Verune'; R. de B.'s 'Le Bon-jour', to Louise de Haute-Mer, Dame de Prye et Beuzeville, Baronne de Toussy. The exceptions are Des Prez's 'Tout', to God ('Au Tout Puissant'), and Demons's *Demonstration*, to the city of Amiens.

31   Numerous examples could be given; one of the most famous in French is Du Bellay's final sonnet of the *Regrets*, to Henri ii : 'Elargissez encor sur moi vostre pouvoir, / Sur moy, qui ne suis rien: à fin de faire voir, / Que de rien un grand Roy peult faire quelque chose.'

Canon Law in support, argues that *strenae* are a depraved and absurd pagan ritual practiced by the Romans and irreconcilable with good Christian conduct. The defence essentially argues that many pagan rites and beliefs survive in language in name only, having no practical connection with modern practices; and that *strenae* are a joyful expression of friendship, compatible with the Christian principle of mutual generosity, rather than a cynical transaction. The whole concludes with a poem in hexameters asserting that Christ must take precedence over Janus.

That Marcilius adopted the form of a debate for his history of *strenae* is significant. The *strena* form is bound up with the idea of mutual exchange and transactions in the patronage economy, but it is also associated with friendly competition, and with the dialectical method, the progressive and communal acquisition of knowledge. Thus Marcilius's *Historia strenarum* provides some suggestive parallels to the functioning of these poems. We have already seen how the poetic game originating with Passerat easily moved into the domain of the (parodic) university *disputatio*.[32] The responses and developments of the theme collected in the 1597 Prévosteau compilation frequently adopt the conceit of a contest between the competing constituencies of 'nothing', 'something', and so on, presenting themselves as striving to reach resolution through poetic dialogue. Since the pronouns on which the game hinges are also the titles of the poems, the poems themselves become part of the discourse of equivocation, thus bringing into play self-referential and intertextual reflections on the emulative and collaborative dimension of the poetic process itself (composition, reception, response).

3   The Poetics of 'Nothing'

Although Passerat's poem still had its admirers in the eighteenth century, among them Samuel Johnson,[33] critics since then have tended to judge it harshly, as a work of little poetic merit. Edgar von Mojsisovics saw the 'Nihil' as the most inartistic ('unkünstlerischesten') of Passerat's productions, clearly a work of Passerat the lawyer rather than Passerat the poet and scholar.[34] (Passerat's formation had indeed been as a legal scholar: he had studied under Cujas at Bourges.) Contemporary editors could commend the 'Nihil' on the same basis

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32   Moreover, the formal disputation gives form to the paradoxical encomium. On the links between the scholastic *disputatio* and its parodies and the Renaissance literary paradox, see Colie, *Paradoxia* and Margolin, 'Le Paradoxe'.

33   Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (Oxford, 2006), 2:13–16.

34   Edgar von Mojsisovics, *Jean Passerat, sein Leben und seine Persönlichkeit* (Dresden, 1907), 49.

that von Mojsisovics condemned it, understanding it as a satire on the law.[35] But I would contend that the poem and the responses to it are worth taking seriously as poetry. Other criticisms have been motivated by the notion that Passerat's poem and its offshoots speak of a kind of *fin-de-siècle* decadence in the face of exhaustion of creative possibilities.[36] While this is true to a certain extent—and the poems themselves often make a self-conscious play of it— these poems in fact constitute serious reflections on poetic creation. The poetic game inaugurated by Passerat's 'Nihil' brings into focus a set of issues fundamental to the Renaissance poetics of imitation.

The game takes as its starting point the reduction of poetic composition nearly to a degree-zero, to *minima*, to almost nothing. These are stylistic exercises: style is all; all is in the artistry of *verba*, with *res* reduced to nothing or almost nothing. Dornavius highlighted precisely this point in the heading of his adoxographical compilation: 'in which subjects, held to be either valueless or pernicious, are defended and extolled by means of the advocacy *of style*' ('quibus res, aut pro vilibus vulgo aut damnosis habitae, styli patrocinio vindicantur, exornantur'). This is the essence of paradoxical writing, which, as Malloch astutely observes, consists entirely in its form of words, and cannot be paraphrased as there is no underlying argument.[37] But from this reduction to almost nothing, this process of distillation—alchemy is an important reference point in many of these texts—there emerges *something*; in fact, *something* proliferates and multiplies, generates a *copia* that gains in force as the sequence of poems accumulates, forming an elaborate structure of cross-reference and intertextuality.

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35   The printer of the 1623 compilation *Argumentorum ludicrorum et amoenitatum scriptores varii* commended study of Passerat's 'Nihil' and Marcilius's 'Nemo' particularly to students of law: 'si de Iure pronuncias, de Nemine ac Nihilo versus examina. Mirum enim, quam in fori litibus arrideat status inficialis, dum vel a Nemine factum, vel nihil factum esse constanter asseveratur' ('If you are a student of Law, examine the verses on No-one and Nothing. For it is amazing how in court the *status inficialis* makes a mockery of trials, stubbornly asserting that the deed was done by no-one, or else that nothing was done'). The 'status inficialis' ('position of denial') was a method of defence in forensic rhetoric. The author of these words perhaps also had in mind Passerat's satirical poem on the divinity of lawsuits, the 'Divinité des Procès' (1598).

36   See e.g. Miernowski, *Signes dissimilaires*, 246–8, for the view that Passerat's poem and its imitations represent an etiolated type of the more serious philosophical engagements with 'Nothing' of the earlier sixteenth century. Baines ('From "Nothing" to "Silence"', 149), in what we might call a characteristic late twentieth-century criticism, blames Passerat for not being sufficiently 'subversive' ('Passerat's ramshackle but basically orthodox logic-chopping').

37   Malloch, 'The Techniques', 194.

Passerat's poem begins with a mind empty of inspiration, an empty storehouse.

> Siccine Castalius nobis exaruit humor?
> Usque adeo ingenii nostri est exhausta facultas,
> Immunem ut videar [*sic* for videat] redeuntis ianitor anni?   (p. 1)

Has the Castalian spring run so dry for me? Are my mental faculties so exhausted that the doorkeeper of the returning year should see me giftless?

But from the barren mind arises the impulse to innovate, to revive the poet's *inventio*:

> Quod nusquam est potius nova per vestigia quaeram.
> Ecce autem, partes dum sese versat in omnes,
> Invenit mea Musa NIHIL, ne despice munus.   (p. 1)

Let me rather seek what is nowhere by breaking new ground. See how my Muse, turning in all directions, has found NOTHING: don't despise this gift.

The claim to be venturing out on untrodden paths is itself a poetic commonplace. Indeed, Passerat highlights the fact that the impulse to innovate is compelled by the fact that the ancients have already said everything, and nothing is left to say (a variation on the oft-repeated Terentian saying 'nihil dictum quod non dictum prius'):

> Res ea narratur quae nulli audita priorum,
> Ausonii et Graii dixerunt caetera vates:
> Ausoniae indictum NIHIL est Graiaeque Camoenae.   (p. 1)

What is being related here has never been heard by anyone before: the Latin and Greek poets have said all the rest: NOTHING has been left unsaid by the Latin and Greek Muses.

The situation that motivates the composition of 'Nihil', then, is that there is both *nothing*—a mind empty of inspiration—and *too much*—a mind replete with the already said. The poet's starting point is to evacuate poetic discourse of its content, to empty out the storehouse of tradition in order to find

the 'nothing' that is left; but the poet goes on to compose a text that makes a virtue of its intertextual plenitude, its absolute reliance upon other texts for its meanings. (These poetic games rely in no small part on the reframing of the proverbial, the commonplace, the already said.)[38] In Passerat's poem, and in many of the others that followed it, there is a constant tension between a model of pure poetic creation 'from nothing', and the reality of a text constructed from the materials of tradition; a tension, indeed, which is present in the very word *inventio*, which encompasses both models of creation.

This tension carries through into the other poems in the sequence, which make efforts to replicate Passerat's conceit of pure innovation, but at the same time draw attention to their position as moves in an intertextual game. 'Quelque chose', 'Tout', 'Le moyen', 'Si peu que rien', 'On', 'Il' and 'Le Bon-jour', each reference the previous poems in the sequence, each new poem adding one more term to the sequence and asserting that it encompasses all of the previous ones. Jean-Claude Margolin, assuming that Philippe Girard was the author of all three of the poems 'Rien', 'Quelque chose' and 'Tout', thought that the composition of this triad represented Girard's attempt to render Passerat's poem into French, otherwise impossible by straightforward translation.[39] Although mistaken in this assumption, Margolin affords an important insight: the sequence of poems responding to Passerat should be read as a dialectical development of Passerat's theme. There is an accumulation of meaning as these poems reference and integrate into their conceit the previous poems in the sequence, a sequence composed of internally warring elements but held together by its central conceit—by the internal force of style, as it were.

The imitative procedure of the poems that first respond to Passerat's 'Nihil'—'Quelque chose', and 'Aliquid' (which in part translates the former)—is that of verbal rearrangement and recasting. Presenting themselves as the diametrical opposite ('opposé contraire') of Passerat's poem, they function as a sort of verbal mirror image, taking up Passerat's conceits, and inverting and amplifying them: replacing a 'nothing' with a 'something'. Significantly, Girard and the 'Aliquid' poet invert Passerat's complaint that the Latin and Greek poets said everything: however much the ancients said, they argue, there is always *something* left to say, since (as I would gloss the point) imitative reframing creates new meaning. The something that is left is the meaning generated from allusion and intertextuality. The proof is in Passerat's poem itself, whose

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38   Cf. Terence Cave's observation that the paradox is 'the negative *alter ego* of the commonplace': 'Thinking with Commonplaces: The Example of Rabelais', in *Retrospectives: Essays in Literature, Poetics and Cultural History* (London, 2009), 38–47 (40).

39   Margolin, 'Le Paradoxe', 75.

success, according to Girard and others, disproves its own premise: his nothing is really something. Thus: countering Passerat's 'students love to learn NOTH-ING', Girard writes: 'every book has SOMETHING good in it' (14), bringing into play that commonplace 'no book is so bad that good could not be had from some part of it'.[40] And he expands on this with the classical image of the bee collecting 'somethings' from flowers to make something new: a poetological *locus classicus*.[41]

Marcilius's 'Lusus de nemine' (1583, revised 1586) also functions as a reflection on *imitatio*. Marcilius was an intellectual rival of Passerat's—both wrote commentaries on Catullus, and Marcilius would end up being Passerat's successor as professor of eloquence at the Collège Royal—and he was clearly resentful at the success of Passerat's poem. In a framing device added to the revised version, 'Nemo' appears to the poet in a dream and reproves him for allowing Passerat's 'Nihil' to steal his thunder:

> Crede mihi, transfert iam tua regna NIHIL.
> Sublectumque illud sua per vestigia carmen
>   Esse ait, et loquitur nil nisi vindicias.   (p.3)

> Believe me, Nihil is already taking over your dominion, and says that that poem [i.e. Marcilius's first version of the 'Lusus de nemine'] had been scavenged in its wake, and speaks of nothing but its prior claim.

In claiming priority for his own poem (and in taking a swipe at Passerat, whose Nihil is said by Nemo to be 'that most timid of things' that 'taunts with empty speech') Marcilius is claiming too much, since Nemo had already a long history:[42] indeed, Marcilius hits upon many of the same conceits—playing on proverbial, biblical, and classical commonplaces containing the word 'nemo'—already taken up by von Hutten in his 'Nemo', although he appears not to have known it. However, despite what Bayless says about it,[43] the subject of Marcilius's poem is not the St. Nemo of the medieval sermons: it is a humanist production through and through, and his material is impeccably classical.

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40   Pliny the Younger had attributed this saying to his uncle: 'dicere etiam solebat nullum esse librum tam malum ut non aliqua parte prodesset' (*Ep.* 3.5.10).

41   On the apian metaphor, see G. W. Pigman, 'Versions of Imitation in the Renaissance', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 33 (1980), 1–32 (4–7).

42   Fricke, *Niemand*, 441–521, collects the most relevant texts, from Radulphus on (but wrongly states (132) that Marcilius's poem was first published in 1597).

43   Bayless, *Parody*, 86.

Indeed, Marcilius's poem makes great play of Nemo's pedigree and ancestry—a pedigree which is, emphatically, a classical literary one: Marcilius tells us, his ancestor is Homer's 'OUTIS', the Odyssean 'No-man'. Accordingly Marcilius's poem, more than any other in the sequence, is saturated in *imitatio* and allusive play with classical sources.

> Sic ego: sic NEMO contra. Timidissime rerum
>   Terret inanilogis te NIHIL opprobriis?
> Cur non et culices, papposque timere volanteis
>   Incipis, aut umbra contremere ipse tua?   (p. 3)

> That is what I said: and this was the response, *nem. con.*: 'Are you afraid of that most timorous of things, Nothing, and its empty taunts? Why not also fear gnats, and dandelion fluff, or tremble at your own shadow?'

Marcilius weaves classical references into Nemo's speech: an allusion to Virgil's *Culex* is probably meant (and by extension, encompassing the long tradition of paradoxical encomia of small and worthless things—for such texts on *culices* and *umbrae*, see Dornavius), but the echo of Lucretius ('pappos volantes')—from a passage where 'culices' also appear (*De rerum natura* 3.381–393)—extends the intertextual game, since Lucretius had also been a key reference point for Passerat's 'Nihil'.[44]

The poet, embarrassed by the harangue, is spurred on to ensure that his own 'Nemo' will defeat Passerat's 'Nihil' in war. His language is borrowed from classical epic. He echoes the extended opening of the *Aeneid* ('at nunc horrentia Martis / arma virumque cano'): 'postmodo bella canam atque horrentia NEMINIS arma' (p. 4). He combines this with an allusion to Lucan's *Pharsalia* 1.1, relocating the civil war to 'Utopian fields'. This is exemplary of the imitative method of these poems: it evacuates the discourse of its content, making the subjects of Lucan's poem no-one and nothing, its setting a no-place:

> Aut si quis negat hoc Plautino e semine pistor,
>   Conserere incipiant NEMO NIHILque manum
> Bella per UTOPICOS plusquam civilia campos
>   Gliscent, de NIHILO NEMO leget spolia.   (p. 4)

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44   For example, Passerat's 'absque loco motuque NIHIL per inane uagatur' alludes to Lucretius *De rerum natura* 1.333–5. It is significant that the Latin name of Passerat's dedicatee, Henri de Mesmes (Memmius) was also the name of Lucretius's dedicatee; it was partly for that reason that Denis Lambin had dedicated his commentary on the first book of Lucretius (1563) to the same Henri de Mesmes.

> Or if some miller from Plautine stock[45] denies this [that Nemo defeats Nihil], let Nemo and Nihil engage in combat, wars worse than civil will break out throughout Utopian fields, Nemo from Nihil will gather the spoils.

Marcilius's game thus has a dimension beyond the basic conceit: he makes his Nemo into the perfect poet, the perfect orator, the perfect writer, indeed, a sort of universal writing subject. Nemo loves only poetry ('NEMO nil nisi carmen amat'); Nemo is gifted with multifaceted art ('multiplici praeditus arte'). Nemo, like poetry itself, speaks in silence and can relate true and false things at once:

> NEMO etiam vigilans dormit: vigilatque sopitus,
> Cum loquiturque tacet, cumque tacet loquitur.
> NEMO etiam quae scit, nescit: tanti ille silenti est:
> NEMO simul vera et falsa referre potest.   (p. 6)

> No-one sleeps when awake, and is awake in sleep, is silent when speaking and can speak when silent. No-one knows not what he knows: such is his silence. No-one can relate things both true and false at the same time.

Probably Marcilius had in mind here the Muses at the start of Hesiod's *Theogony*, who 'know how to speak many false things similar to / equivalent to true ones' ('Ἴδμεν ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγειν ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα'). Marcilius thus makes his 'Nemo' into the source of all poetic authority, and asserts, against Passerat, his superior command of classical learning, and his greater artistry and invention.

Marcilius's Latin intervention is based on a model of individual authorship and creativity quite different from that of the vernacular salon poems. Most of the poems in the French sequence were published anonymously. For the wider reception of the sequence of poems, the identity of the contributors (with the exception of Passerat, who is usually mentioned by name as the originator) mattered less than the connection to a shared set of reference points. The poems presented themselves as discrete interventions in an ever-expanding contest; but they could also be read—in the compilations that collected them together—as belonging to a textual continuum, detached from individual authorship and held together by the complex web of cross-reference and allusion. At the same time, the poets wished to be known and recognized by those

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45   The point of this formulation eludes me. Legend had it that Plautus had worked in a mill. Could this be an oblique reference to the 'P G P Molinensis' (P.G.P. of Moulins) who composed 'Aliquid'?

in the know—hence the games and equivocations with their names—and to stake a claim as members of a community. As we shall see in the next section, the ties that bound this community together were as much political as they were literary.

The 'Nothing' discovered by Passerat's Muse generated a potentially infinite proliferation of words. Margolin, apparently unaware of the other poems and responses in the sequence, observed that 'on pourrait parfaitement imaginer une suite, et même une suite indéfinie, où RIEN, QUELQUE CHOSE et TOUT continueraient de rivaliser en subtilité' ('one might easily imagine a sequence, even an infinite sequence, in which 'Rien', 'Quelque chose' and 'Tout' would keep striving to outdo one another in subtlety'). He was right to imagine such a thing. The next poem in the sequence, 'Le moyen', published in the following year, extended the *domaine de la lutte* if not quite *ad infinitum*, then certainly *ad nauseam* (it ran to 816 lines). By the time the 'Si peu que rien' poet added his contribution, there was already a sense of the game being exhausted ('Et quelqu'un me dira: Vous venez à haute heure / Pour glaner en ce champ. Perte à qui trop demeure' (Someone will tell me: You're arriving too late to glean this field. First come, first served, p. 1)); but the end of the sequence was still a long way off. To be sure, the participants in the game were sharply aware of the risk of being caught up in an infinite and ultimately meaningless proliferation:

> Ne vois tu pas que Rien, que Quelque chose, et Tout,
> Sont trois infinitez sans principe et sans bout?   ('Le moyen', p. 7)

> Do you not see that Nothing, Something and All are three infinities without beginning and end?

The poet of 'Le moyen' recognized that the game depended on the unbounded signification of those pronouns. Accordingly his poem (in the shortened version at least), rather than competing on the level of the conceit itself, reduces the play with pronouns largely to a commentary on the reception of the previous poems. Instead of a descent into an abyss of meaninglessness, the infinite proliferation of the discourse can thus be figured as a 'harmonie', precisely what wins for the poets a 'gloire infinie': 'Que ces infinitez, a leur triple Harmonie, / Ont iustement acquis une gloire infinie' (That these infinities, from their threefold harmony, have deservedly won infinite renown, p. 7).

A characteristic feature of these compositions is the extensive deployment of inexpressibility *topoi*, and figures of *adynaton* (impossibility). Passerat uses the familiar poetic shorthand for innumerability, a comparison to grains of sand in the Libyan desert, a *topos* that is taken up again in the 'Lusus de nemine',

'Le moyen', and others. 'Aliquid' uses the 'many mouths' *topos*, ('linguae licet, oraque centum, / Sit vel ferrea vox'— 'even if I had a hundred tongues and mouths, / or a voice of iron…', p. 2), protesting the inadequacy of the poet to repay his patrons' largesse, or do justice to the vastness of his theme. The use of *topoi*—formulations unmoored from specific textual reference points and so deprived of the possibility of a meaningful allusive relation—risks descent into empty cliché. But as Stephen Hinds showed, the deployment of this very 'many mouths' *topos* in ancient poetry could involve more complex intertextual articulations.[46] Likewise here we may read the *topos* not as mere poetic cliché but as productive of a meaningful allusive relationship. The Virgilian verses on which the 'Aliquid' poet models his phrasing (*Aen.* 6.625–7; *Geo.* 2.43–4) are themselves already rearticulations of a venerable tradition stretching back to Homer. The presence of this *topos* in 'Aliquid' thus brings a supplementary metapoetic meaning. Passerat's poetic game had started from the position that the ancients made every word a cliché, leaving nothing for the modern poet to say. But as the 'many mouths' *topos* indicates, the trope of incompleteness was already built into ancient poetic tradition from the very start: thus it cannot be case that the ancients said everything. The poet's incomplete capacity to express is shown to be not a function of his being a 'late' poet of a decadent age, but a feature of classical literary expression. Moreover, the fact that this has been said already—the fact of its being a *topos*—does not limit the capacity of the new poet's rearticulation to make new meanings. It is precisely by virtue of the poet's ability to make meaning by speaking again words spoken so many times already that he may indeed speak with a hundredfold voice.

4   The Theology of 'Nothing'

The incommensurability and ineffability of these subjects, far from limiting and circumscribing the possibility of expression, is precisely what gives rise to their proliferation. They generate their copiousness precisely from what is unsayable or unknowable. Images of inexpressibility in Des Prez's 'Tout' serve a similar function, but the idea is given a different cast, in the context of what is essentially a devotional poem rooted in *contemptus mundi* traditions:

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46   Stephen Hinds, *Allusion and Intertext: Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Poetry* (Cambridge, 1998), 34–47, 94–5.

'Au pris de ce grand TOUT, QUELQUE CHOSE est un rien' (p. 25).[47] In striving to speak of 'l'ineffable puissance' of God, the poet can only rely upon poetic circumlocutions:

> Et quand aurois-je fait si je voulois TOUT dire?
> Plustost je conterois les sables de la mer,
> Plustost j'arpenterois la region de l'air,
> Plustost j'espuiserois l'Ocean goutte à goutte,
> Plustost je nombrerois dans l'azur de leur voute
> L'innombrable esquadron des brandons allumez,
> Qui flambent sans matiere, et ne sont consumez.
> Tout ne se peut comprendre, et ses mortels encombres
> Surpassent l'infiny de l'infiny des nombres.   (p. 30)

When would I have done if I tried to utter ALL? Sooner count the sands of the sea, sooner measure the air's great domain, sooner empty the ocean drop by drop, sooner number in the azure vault the innumerable hord of blazing firebrands that burn without matter and are never consumed. ALL cannot be encompassed, and its mortal entanglements surpass the infinity of the infinity of numbers.

Negative Theology is a key reference point here.[48] The ineffable divine can only be spoken of as Nothing, a transcendent Nothing that is Everything, for in God opposites coincide (the Cusan *coincidentia oppositorum*). Before Passerat, the philosophical Nihil had already been taken up in humanist poetry, by one Matthaeus Frigillanus (Mathieu Fragellan, of Beauvais), otherwise known for his commentaries on Plato's dialogues (including the *Timaeus*) and other philosophical works. His *De Nihilo Hecatodia plane aurea* (Paris: Denis Du Pré, 1562) is not a paradoxical encomium, but a 100-line philosophical poem in elegiacs expounding the thought of ps.-Dionysius, Nicolas of Cusa and Charles de

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47   Cf. Bovelles's formulation of the characteristic Christian paradox, 'Quod omnia ad Deum nihil sunt'. The paradoxical play of 'Tout' and 'Rien' in French mystical and devotional writing has its fullest expression in the work of Marguerite de Navarre (Miernowski, *Signes dissimilaires*, 33–89). Of interest in this connection is a little known book by a poet called Nicole Bergedé: *Les odes pénitentes du moins que rien* (Paris, 1550).

48   Miernowski, *Signes dissimilaires*, provides a useful account of the reception of ps.-Dionysius in French humanism, with a particular focus on the presence of negative theological ideas in vernacular poetry.

Bovelles.[49] We have already noted that Passerat's 'Nihil' would end up being aligned with this tradition of thought, in the commentary of Schoock.

Although Schoock's commentary is largely taken up with spurious parallels and the ostentation of irrelevant erudition, its final section is a philosophical reflection on the problem of creation *ex nihilo*, dealt with more fully in Chapter 12 of his *Tractatus*. Schoock is guided in this by his reading of Théodore de Bèze's epigram on Passerat's 'Nihil', a poem which merits our close attention:

> Pace mihi liceat, Sapientes, dicere vestra,
>   Qui factum ex nihilo dicitis esse nihil,
> En qui vos verbis, qui vos ratione refellat,
>   Et quiddam faciat quod fuit ante nihil.
> Quiddam (inquam) ex nihilo faciat, quo credere quidquam
>   Grandius, aut etiam fingere velle, nefas.
> Immo, quod mirum magis est, qui misceat una
>   Sic alicui nihilum, sic aliquid nihilo,
> Ut confirmet idem simul esse, aliquidque nihilque,
>   Et neutrum esse probet, quod sit utrumque tamen.
> Mirus homo, Nihil esse aliquid statuensve negansve,
>   Quodque negat statuens, quod statuitque negans.[50]

> By your leave, allow me to say, you wise men who say that Nothing was made from Nothing, here is a man who refutes you with words and with reason, and makes what was Nothing before into Something. Something, I say, he makes from Nothing, greater than which it is wrong to believe or even imagine anything. Nay, even more extraordinary, a man who mingles together Nothing with Something, Something with Nothing, such that he demonstrates Something and Nothing to be both the same, and proves to be neither what is nevertheless both. Extraordinary fellow! Both asserting and denying that Nothing is Something; both proposing what he denies, and denying what he has proposed.

The epigram, with its parodic use of scholastic language, appears to make a mockery of ontological and metaphysical speculation. For Bèze, divine creation *ex nihilo* is essentially incomprehensible, a matter of faith not reason.[51]

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49   Ossola, *Le antiche memorie*, 24–31, gives an edition and Italian translation of this poem.
50   Quoted from *Theodori Bezae Vezelii Poemata varia* (Geneva, 1597), 195.
51   Jeffrey Mallinson, *Faith, Reason, and Revelation in Theodore Beza, 1519–1605* (Oxford, 2003), 163.

Passerat's poem is to be read as exposing the inanity of such speculations. The final lines of the epigram mimic that descent into obscurity and meaninglessness.

This is not, however, mere mockery: Bèze is also expressing a genuine admiration for Passerat's achievement in creating something from nothing, and in elaborating such a perfectly balanced paradox, suspended harmoniously between mutually exclusive propositions. Passerat's achievement was not a philosophical but a poetic one. Earlier humanist poetic theorists had explored the analogy between divine creation *ex nihilo* and poetic creation. Lorenzo Valla's discussion of the words 'poeta' (*Elegantiae* 4.32) was a key reference point: Valla cited the words of the Nicene Creed which calls God 'ποιητὴν οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς' ('maker [poieten] of Heaven and Earth'). Jodocus Badius Ascensius (1462–1535) elaborated the connection more fully:[52] in his *Silvae morales* (1492), he aligned the poet with the divine creator because poets, like God, create *ex nihilo*. In his Terence *praenotamenta* (1502) he took the analogy further, asserting that poets have in common with God the creator the ability to harmonize *contraria*.[53] These ideas still resonate at the end of the sixteenth century, and even have their after-echo in the 1661 commentary of Schoock. It was precisely these aspects of Passerat's poetic achievement that Bèze's epigram highlighted: to have created something from nothing and in so doing to transcend the dialectic of 'something' and 'nothing'. His 'Nihil' captured the fundamental essence of poetic creation.

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52   Felipe González Vega, '"De poetica theologica": presencias de alegorismo platónico en la exégesis humanista y una mediación de las 'Siluae Morales' de Badio Ascencio (1492)', in *Humanismo y pervivencia del mundo clásico: homenaje al profesor Antonio Fontán = Las artes literarias en el Renacimiento* 2 (2002), 799–810 (802, 810); and Paul White, *Jodocus Badius Ascensius: Commentary, Commerce and Print in the Renaissance* (Oxford, 2013), 269–70.

53   Badius, 'Praenotamenta', in *P. Terentii aphri ... Comedie* (Lyon, 1511), sig. aiiii^r: 'Poets, therefore, often imitate God inasmuch as they not only embellish real material but sometimes imagine it entirely, just as God does not only create through nature (like being born from like), but also created the primary matter of all things *ex nihilo*; for which reason in Greek the 'maker of heaven and earth' and a maker of poems is designated by the same word, i.e. *poeta* [...] Likewise just as God made all that He created harmonize and fit together in a certain proportion, even though many things are in conflict with one another, so that despite the generation and corruption of particular things the universe nevertheless remains unified in its being; so too the poet creates his composition as a unity even though it is composed of diverse material.'

5   The Politics of 'Nothing'

The particular strain of adoxography deriving from Passerat's 'Nihil' lent itself very readily to moral and social satire: '*nothing* is sacred these days...', and so on. The 'Nihil' conceit did not have quite as strong an association with satire as did the cognate 'Nemo' tradition, which had a rich history running from the medieval sermons through to Ulrich von Hutten's revised 'Nemo' (1515–18) and beyond. Indeed, the elements of satire in Passerat's original are few, and handled with a light touch. But some of his later imitators would be much more heavy-handed, to the extent that their productions shade into propaganda and pamphleteering.

Most of the French poets participating in the game make more or less extended reference to the current religious conflicts; indeed, one could read them as a kind of ongoing commentary on that period of the Wars of Religion known as the 'guerre des trois Henris' (1585–1589), followed by the accession and conversion of Henri IV, and the conclusion of the conflict with the Edict of Nantes (1598). If Janus the two-faced god appropriately presides over the paradoxist, and Janus the tutelary deity of the New Year appropriately presides over the giver of *strenae*, the Janus whose temple at Rome stayed open in wartime also appropriately presides over these poems, written in a period of transition from a time of war to a time of peace. Girard, indeed, made that link explicit: 'QUELQUE CHOSE pourroit [...] nous donner la paix, / La paix tant desiree, et clorre, pour jamais / De Ianus Clusien la guerriere chapelle' ('SOMETHING might bring us peace, / Longed-for peace, and close forever / The temple of war of Janus Clusius', p. 17).

The political affiliations of the French poets who responded to Passerat, and their patrons, were predominantly to the 'politique' faction (moderate, Catholic, royalist). The association is in one sense unsurprising, since Passerat himself was a 'politique' royalist—later he would contribute to the *Satyre Menippée*—and his patron Henri de Mesmes, also a moderate, had negotiated the treaty of Saint-Germain in 1572. The dedicatee of Theodorus Marcilius's 'Nemo' (1583) was the prominent statesman and diplomat under Henri III, Pomponne de Bellièvre (1529–1607).[54] Pierre de L'Estoille (1546–1611),[55] dedicatee of Fonteny's 'Personne' (1587), was a 'politique', and the poem itself is very much in support of Henri III: Fonteny writes of his plan to undertake a greater work in praise of Henri, and celebrates other poet-courtiers of Henri such as

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54   On whom see Olivier Poncet, *Pomponne de Bellièvre (1529–1607) Un homme d'État au temps des guerres de religion* (Paris, 1998).

55   Tom Hamilton, *Pierre de l'Estoile and his World in the Wars of Religion* (Oxford, 2017).

Duperron. The most overtly political poem in the sequence is Jacques de La Guesle's 'Le moyen' (1588 version; the later edition excises much of the political content). La Guesle dedicated it to Achille de Harlay (1536–1616); both poet and dedicatee were active in the 'politique' faction of the Paris Parlement, of which Harlay was 'premier président'.[56] 'On' (before 1596) is an *étrenne* for another prominent 'politique', 'De Chaste' (Aymar de Clermont-Chaste, d.1603); but it is as a whole a rather incoherent performance, oscillating uneasily between joking encomium ('on' is responsible for all good in the world) and more satirical mode ('on' is responsible for discord and conflict and the evil that men do). 'Il' (before 1596) is dedicated to Gaspard Pelet de La Vérune (d.1598), another royalist, and to his ally 'Du Pont' (probably Étienne de Bonpar, sieur du Pont); the poem itself, framed as an *étrenne*, takes the form of a lament for the ravages of the wars. The 'Aliquid' poet, the Moulins professor 'P.G.P.'—probably writing around 1597 and so after the conversion of Henri IV—appended to his version a lengthy praise of Henri IV and the Bourbons (Moulins was the capital of the Bourbonnais province).

The intensification, then pacification, of the poetic conflict might even parallel political developments, and the metaphor of the emulative relation between the poems as a battle or all-out warfare could very easily shade into the poets' references to the Wars of Religion. The participants in the poetic contest that grew up around Passerat's 'Nihil' easily adopted the metaphor of poetic warfare. Marcilius, rewriting his 'Nemo' in 1586 used the language of epic war to frame his intervention as a battle to the death between his 'Nemo' and Passerat's 'Nihil', a new 'war worse than civil' from which 'Nemo' would emerge victorious. Girard, and the Latin poet of 'Aliquid' after him, presented their subject as the deadly enemy ('l'ennemy capital'/'lethifer hostis') of the 'Nihil' of Passerat. But as the sequence continued, the poets adopted more conciliatory language. The point of the contest was no longer to vanquish the foe, but to find a language that could encompass and contain the dispute and provide resolution to the conflict. Thus for the poet of 'Le moyen', the scenario the poem plays out ('the mean' being the 'resolution' of the dispute between, 'nothing', 'something', etc.) is designed to evoke the ideal logic of the disputation (proposition – antithesis – resolution). 'Le moyen' resolves the contest, and even encompasses all of the previous efforts, which would never have come into being in the first place without 'le moyen'. The 'Si peu que rien' poet (in a genealogy reminiscent of Ronsard's *Discours des misères de ce temps*, where 'Dame Presumption' gave birth to 'Opinion') makes 'si peu que rien' father to the 'affreux Demon qu'on appelle Duel', the discord sown among the people of

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56   Patterson, '"Politique" Propaganda', 262.

France. The conflict itself arose from 'almost nothing', but 'almost nothing' could also resolve it. 'On' moves further away from the confrontational language that characterized the early stages of the poetic contest: instead the poem is posited as a *defence* of the previous ones, which are under attack from critics:

> ON ne fait cas de *Rien*, ON blasme *Quelque chose*,
> ON n'aprouve pas *tout*, ON ne veut *du moyen*,
> ON ne se chaut si peu que de *Si peu que rien*.
> Voila qu'ON blasme autruy pour se louer soymesme.
> Mais que peut ON aymer si soymesme ON ne s'ayme?   (pp. 11–12)

> ONE values not *Nothing*, ONE criticizes *Something*, ONE admires not *All*, ONE rejects *The Mean*, ONE cares almost nothing for *Almost Nothing*. See how ONE blames others to praise oneself. But what can ONE love if ONE does not love oneself?

Similarly, in 'Il' the tone is one of deference rather than outdoing:

> Excusez ce discours, s'IL ose à vous se joindre.
> IL ne s'egale à RIEN, IL s'estime encore moindre
> Que PERSONNE, IL cognoit QVELQVE CHOSE plus grand
> IL sçait que TOVT est dit. IL voit qu'en discourant
> On fait cas du MOYEN qui [*sic* for 'qu'IL'?] n'a moyen de suivre,
> Bien qu'IL avise un autre en SI PEU QVE RIEN vivre.
> IL sçait qu'ON a tant dit, et si bien, que les vieux,
> Les vieux peres Romains ne sçauroyent dire mieux.   (p. 17)

> Please forgive this speech if IT dares to join you. IT is no equal to NOTHING, IT judges itself less than NOBODY, IT is aware of SOMETHING greater, IT knows that ALL has been said. IT observes that conversation is abuzz with THE MEAN that IT can by no means follow, while IT notices another living on ALMOST NOTHING. IT knows that ONE has said so much, and so well, that the ancients, the ancient Roman fathers could not have said it better.

As the poem develops, it becomes clear that this will not be the anticipated play of equivocations on the pronoun 'it', but a lament for the annihilation of meaning in an age of civil war ('Il te dit que ce siecle est un siecle insensé') that has profoundly disrupted the social and moral order ('IL a brouillé tout ordre').

It culminates in a prayer to God to restore order and meaning ('Qu'IL recouvre le sens avecques ta faveur'). In framing the poem as a deferential rather than adversarial intervention in the sequence, the 'IL' poet aligns this bid for peace and the restoration of order with a bid for peace in the poetic contest: his poem sweeps away the game of equivocations and obfuscations, and tries to put an end to that meaningless proliferation of poetic conceits.

'Le Bon-jour' (1599), the first of the poems in the sequence to have been written after the Edict of Nantes, celebrates the 'bon jour' that marks the end of war and the advent of peace ('Mais BON-IOUR [...] nous a donné en France une Paix generalle'), just as the same 'bon jour' caps and encompasses the entire poetic contest:

> Il n'y a doncq' MOYEN que RIEN cy bas ON oeuvre,
> De Bon, si un BON-IOUR ne preside à TOUT oeuvre.
> Un BON-IOUR vaut doncq' mieux, qu'ON, et SI PEU QUE RIEN,
> Un BON-IOUR donne à TOUT et l'estre, et LE MOYEN.   (p. 6)

> ONE can by any MEANS do NOTHING good in this world, without a GOOD-DAY to favour ALL the undertaking. A GOOD-DAY is worth more therefore than ONE and ALMOST NOTHING, a GOOD-DAY gives ALL its existence and its MEANS.

Thus the progress of the poetic contest itself parallels political developments, the intensification then resolution of the civil wars.

In the poems collected in 1596–1597, the parallel between the topsy-turvy logic of the game initiated by Passerat and the disorder of the wars is an implicit, if persistent, one. But an earlier text had made the connection much more explicit; indeed, had presented itself as an attempt to bring about an end to the conflict and a restoration of the moral and social order precisely by applying the extravagant logic of the paradoxical encomium to political realities. This was the *Demonstration de la quatriesme partie de Rien, et Quelque chose, et Tout* of Jean Demons, printed by Prévosteau in 1594 in a bilingual presentation combining French verse with Latin commentary, and in a second version in 1595 (now titled *La Sextessence diallactique* [sic] *et potentielle...*, and rededicated to the newly coronated Henri IV), which replaced the Latin commentary with a much more expansive French one.[57] The subtitle of the 1595 *Sextessence*

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57   A detailed study of these texts is to be found in Miernowski, *Signes dissimilaires*, 237–259. I base my account of Demons's work in part on Miernowski's, but differ from him in reading it not exactly as 'parody', 'pastiche', and a mere rhetorical amusement, but as an extravagant fantasy embroidered in the space where the disruptive logic of Passerat's game intersects with the magical thinking of the occult.

promised to 'transform and convert the things that are considered most harmful and abominable into good and beneficial ones', a formulation evocative of the procedures of adoxography,[58] but here in fact referring to the author's claim to be able to solve the religious conflict and 'cure the haemorrhages, wounds, tumours and venereal ulcers of France'.[59]

Demons's idea is to take the adoxographical logic of Passerat and his imitators literally, shifting its frame of reference from rhetoric to natural magic: this would not be a mere game with words, but an attempt to alter reality by conjuring with divine and demonic names. Demons positioned his text as a fourth sequel to Passerat's 'Nihil' , which would complete and outdo the 'trio' of 'Rien', 'Quelque chose' and 'Tout' (he was clearly unaware of the other poems in the sequence that had already appeared before 1594, and also unaware of the names of the poets except Passerat).[60] In fact, he claims to be adding the fourth, fifth, and sixth instalments, since the 'quintessence' and 'sextessence' would follow the 'quatrieme partie'. In the controversy over which is more praiseworthy, 'nothing', 'something' or 'all', Demons claims to have found the answer: it is the name of God. He views the poetic sequence at first (in the *Demonstration de la quatriesme partie*) in terms of the metaphor of musical harmony, and then (in the *Quintessence* and *Sextessence*) as a process of alchemical distillation, the result of which would be nothing less than the solution to ending the religious conflict.

Thus the dialectic of the poetic exchange is transmuted into alchemy, and the wordplay characteristic of the paradoxical encomium into a magic conjuring with divine and demonic names. But the occult practices expounded in the poem—Demons's main source is Cornelius Agrippa—are given a different emphasis in the commentary, which rejects them as dangerous fictions, treating them instead as metaphors. As Miernowski argues, the work thus ends up being essentially a 'political allegory' for France's situation. Again this process of allegorization is understood by Demons precisely in terms of the

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58 Cf. Dornavius's characterization of the adoxographical pieces collected in his *Amphitheatrum*: 'quibus res, aut pro vilibus vulgo aut damnosis habitae, styli patrocinio vindicantur, exornantur' ('in which subjects, held to be either valueless or pernicious, are defended and extolled by means of the advocacy of style').

59 'Tant pour guarir l'hemorragie, playes, tumeurs & ulceres veneriennes de la France, que pour changer & convertir les choses estimees plus nuisibles & abominables en bonnes & utiles'.

60 Demons, 1594, 8–10. 'Therefore in order to understand the demonstration of the fourth part of NOTHING, SOMETHING and ALL (which are the terms of the enigma), the reader should know that Passerat, a man of singular learning and Royal Reader at the University of Paris, along with two others who did not wish to be named, composed and sang a musical trio, which is to say three poems [...].'

logic of the paradoxical encomium: he sees his text as operating 'a metamorphosis of magical traditions, or a conversion of the most detestable of things into good' ('une metamorphose des traditions magiques, cest a dire, des choses plus detestables en bonnes', 1595 dedication to Henri IV, 11).

As Passerat's game expanded beyond France, it also crossed confessional boundaries relatively easily. It seems to have been particularly enjoyed in Calvinist circles: in the *Collegium Casimirianum*, and with Molnár, Aemilius Portus, and the circle around Moritz of Hesse-Kassel, although not generally for overtly political purposes—the 'De Nihili antiquitate et multiplici potestate' (1609) of Aemilius Portus being the exception. Further evidence for its popularity among Calvinists comes from the album of the Dutch humanist Johan Radermacher the Elder (Johannes Rotarius, 1538–1617), which includes an anonymous poem 'Nihil' written as a *strena* to one 'Aulus'. The poem, clearly modelled on that of Passerat, consists of 17 elegiac couplets beginning 'Vis tibi Januariis donem de more Kalendis / Munus; habe mirumque insolitumque: NIHIL.' (You want me to give you a gift for the first of January? Please accept one that is wonderful and out of the ordinary: NOTHING').[61] The popularity of the game among Calvinists may have been in part a result of the endorsement of Passerat's poem by Théodore de Bèze himself:[62] as we have seen, Bèze included it in his own *Poemata* of 1597, along with a commendatory epigram. Bèze's opponents seized upon this endorsement as a way to attack him. For example, two epigrams printed under the heading ΑΔΗΛΟΝ (i.e., anonymous) in the 1623 compilation *Argumentorum ludicrorum et amoenitatum scriptores varii* (111–112) were clearly written by one of Bèze's many adversaries. The epigrams force Passerat's game into the domain of dangerous theological polemic.

> Qui falso, contra veterum decreta sophorum,
>   Dans nihil, eximium te dare munus ais,
> Sicque profana sacris misces, sic sacra profanis,
>   Sic aliquid nihilo, sic alicui nihilum:

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61   Rijksuniversiteit Gent, Centrale Bibliotheek, ms. 2465; also available in an online edition at <https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/rade004albu01_01>.

62   It was not, however, appreciated by all French Calvinists: Florent Chrestien, for example, alluded to Passerat's 'Nihil' disparagingly in a *strena* of his own to Henri de Mesmes, and he composed two epigrams mocking it, preserved in BnF, ms. Dupuy 837, fol. 9ov: 'Aut Nihil aut sese laudat Passeratius unum / Utrumvis faciat, semper utrumque facit' (Passerat either praises nothing, or praises only himself; / Whichever he does, he always does both); 'Qui nihili magnas res aestimat, impius ille est, / Nam nihili forsan autumat esse Deum' (He who values as nothing what is great, is wicked, / For perhaps he thinks that God is worth nothing). See B. Jacobsen, *Florent Chrestien*, 131.

Ut nihil esse aliquid statuas, aliquidque nihil: [...]
[...]
Heu cave dum ex nihilo quiddam facis, ex aliquo nil,
    Ne fiat nihilum, quod cupis esse aliquid.

Against the principles of the old authorities, you falsely claim, in giving nothing, to be giving an excellent gift, and so mingle the profane with the sacred, the sacred with the profane, something with nothing, nothing with something, that you conclude that nothing is something, and something nothing [...] Ah! Beware when making something from nothing, nothing from something, lest what you want to be something, become nothing.

Sic ne facis nihili divinae oracula chartae,
    Sic nihili sophiae dogmata vera facis?
Te duce confusis naturae legibus ibunt
    Inque suum recident te duce cuncta chaos.
[...]
In coelum quum vana nihil tua carmina tollant,
    Carmina de nihilo scripta putabo nihil.

So you value as nothing the oracles of divine scripture; so you value as nothing the true dogmas of wisdom? With you as guide all will go, the laws of nature thrown into confusion, and revert, with you as guide, back to chaos. [...] Since your worthless verses raise nothing to the heavens, I shall think nothing of your verses written about nothing.

6   The Science of 'Nothing'

It is tempting, at this point in the discussion, to pose the question of why these 'nothings' proliferated at this particular historical moment. Although the 'nothing' conceit had a previous history, and would be periodically revived in later centuries—most famously in English by John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester (*c*.1678), and in French by Louis Coquelet de Péronne (1730)[63]—its heyday was undeniably in the decades around the turn of seventeenth century.

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[63] Coquelet de Péronne wrote two prose encomia, 'L'Éloge de Rien' (1730) and 'L'Éloge de Quelque chose' (1730). Coquelet promised to include Passerat's 'Nihil' in the first printed edition of his 'Éloge de Rien', but reneged on the promise when it went to press, having decided—he claimed—that it would be of minimal interest to his target audience. More likely he wished to exclude anything that might undermine his claim to originality, or that might make his own work suffer from comparison. Mercier de Compiègne did include

One answer might come by connecting the phenomenon with the climate of sceptical thought that was so influential, particularly in France, at this time. Certainly the competing poets perceived some links between their game of verbal equivocation and the stakes of philosophical scepticism: for example, answering Passerat's point that Socrates knew nothing, Girard (and the Latin poet of 'Aliquid' who translates this part of Girard's poem) retorted that Socrates knew something: the fact that he knew nothing. However, a deeper and more extended engagement with sceptical ideas is absent from these texts, setting them apart in style and philosophical motivation from the more overtly libertine engagements that emerged from the Italian academies of the 1630s.

To develop our answer more fully we might easily extend our speculations into the realms of visual art, of mathematics, of science, or even of economics. One might, for example, make connections with the very current problem of the void, culminating, of course, in Pascal's experimental proof of the existence of the vacuum in nature—and his reflections on nothingness in moral and theological terms in the *Pensées*.[64] Alternatively, one might attempt to follow Brian Rotman's extravagant efforts to discover the epistemic isomorphism uniting the introduction of zero in arithmetic, the vanishing point in visual art, and imaginary money in the economy.[65] Such loose speculations are unlikely to shed much light on the literary phenomenon associated with Passerat's 'Nihil'.

Instead, I want to conclude by looking at a scientific text that was directly connected with the phenomenon that grew up around Passerat's poem. Among the texts compiled by Dornavius in 1619 was one by Johannes Kepler. This beautiful short work, *De nive sexangula* ('On the six-cornered snowflake'), was offered as a *strena* in 1611 to Johannes Matthäus Wackher von Wackenfels—a patron I have already mentioned. Kepler, punning on the word 'nix' ('snow' in Latin, 'nothing' in colloquial German), begins his treatise thus:

> Cum non sim nescius, quam Tu ames Nihil, non quidem ob precii vilitatem, sed proper lascivi Passeris lusum argutissimum simul et venustissimum: facile mihi est coniicere, tanto tibi gratius et acceptius fore munus, quanto id Nihilo vicinius.

Passerat's text in full when he revived Coquelet's works in a print edition of 1795, appending also another short mock-treatise on 'Rien' by one Father Daire (1749). Rochester's 'Upon Nothing' is part mock-cosmology, part social satire. Like Passerat's poem and its immediate heirs, Rochester's poem too makes use of the 'nothing' paradox to reflect on poetic creation: it is 'itself about the nature of origins, poetic ones among others' (Baines, 'From "Nothing" to "Silence"', 137).

64   On the vacuum, see e.g. Ossola, *Le antiche memorie*, xxi, for links to Torricelli and Pascal. On Pascal's *Pensées* in this connection, see Colie, *Paradoxia*, 252ff.

65   Brian Rotman, *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero* (Stanford CA, 1987).

> Since I know how fond you are of Nothing, not for its low value, but be-
> cause of the game of that cheeky Sparrow which is both most witty and
> most delightful, it is easy for me to guess that the closer a gift comes to
> Nothing, the more welcome and acceptable it will be to you.

Kepler then describes how he found the appropriate subject, a 'Nothing' that
could lend itself to a similar sort witty and delightful treatment ('what is next
to Nothing, but lends itself to sharpness of wit'), as he crossed the Charles
Bridge in Prague and observed snowflakes settling on his coat. The translator
of the Oxford Clarendon edition (1966; repr. 2014), puzzled by the obscure
'sparrow' reference, despaired of finding the explanation for this 'private
joke'.[66] The reference is, of course, to Jean Passerat, as is obvious to those who
read the text in Dornavius's compilation, where it follows on shortly from the
other texts in the sequence inspired by his poem; and as we have seen, Chris-
toph Köler made the same punning reference to Passerat in his 'Aliquid', also
dedicated to Wackher.

Kepler frames his scientific endeavour in the same terms as the poetic
games that had so delighted his patron: it was a product of the exercise of wit,
motivated by nothing more than a whim, a gift to be received in a spirit of fun.
Such ideas inform not just the rhetorical framing of the work: they also form
part of the explanatory logic of Kepler's treatise. In attempting to answer the
question of why snowflakes take on their specific hexagonal form, Kepler's ef-
forts to propose a mathematical explanation ultimately give way to the Aristo-
telian notion of a formative faculty (*facultas formatrix*); and he resorts to the
familiar early modern idea of the joke of nature, *lusus naturae*.[67] The playful
and aleatory character of the poetic game started by Passerat, motivated by
nothing more than the accumulation of conceit and ornament, inheres also in
the formative faculty of nature itself:

> Respondeo, rationem formatricem non tantum agere propter finem, sed
> etiam propter ornatum, nec solum tendere ad corpora naturalia efficien-
> da, sed etiam solere ludere in fluxis […]

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66   'I am well aware how fond you are of Nothing, not so much for its low price as for the
      sport, as delightful as it is witty, that it affords your pert sparrow' (*The Six-Cornered Snow-
      flake*, ed. Colin Hardie (Oxford, 1966; repr. 2014), 3); and in the footnotes: 'some private
      joke must be behind Kepler's reference to him as a 'lover of Nothing'. But it cannot be
      traced. He perhaps wrote an epigram or an essay on 'nothing' or negation or *privatio boni*
      or the like.' 'Equally obscure is the reference to the sparrow […] Conjecture is vain.' The
      reference was correctly identified by later editors of Kepler's text, first by Robert Halleux,
      L'Étrenne ou la Neige Sexangulaire (Paris, 1975), 6.
67   Cf. Paula Findlen, 'Jokes of Nature and Jokes of Knowledge: The Playfulness of Scientific
      Discourse in Early Modern Europe', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 43 (1990), 292–331.

My reply is: formative reason does not act only for a purpose, but also to adorn. It does not strive to fashion only natural bodies, but is in the habit of playing with the passing moment.
(trans. C. Hardie)

It is a testament to the far-reaching impact of Passerat's Nothing that the literary sensation it created inspired this landmark scientific text – the text, indeed, that originated the so-called 'Kepler conjecture', an unsolved problem in mathematics for 400 years. Its formal proof was finally published in 2017.[68]

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68   The Kepler conjecture concerns the optimal density for the packing of spheres in three-dimensional Euclidean space. Thomas Hales first arrived at the proof in 1998 by means of computer-assisted case-by-case exhaustion, and published it in 2006, but 'without complete certification from the referees'. The verification of the proof is described in Hales et al. 'A Formal Proof of the Kepler Conjecture', *Forum of Mathematics, Pi* 5 (2017), e2. doi:10.1017/fmp.2017.1.

APPENDIX: checklist of texts connected with Passerat's 'Nihil', ordered by date of

editio princeps

Romieu, Marie de, 'Rien', in: *Les premieres œuvres poetiques* (Paris: Lucas Breyer, 1581).

Marcilius, Theodorus, *Lusus de Nemine. Ad D. Pomponium Bellivræum* (Paris: Denis Du Pré, 1583).

Marcilius, Theodorus, *Lusus de nemine […] Nova iam accretione auctus* (Paris: Denis Du Pré, 1586).

Du Verdier, Claude, 'Rien', in: *La Bibliothèque d'Antoine Du Verdier* (Lyon: B. Honorat, 1585).

Passerat, Jean, *Nihil Henrico Memmio, pro xeniis per Ioannem Passeratium* (Paris, Etienne Prévosteau, 1587) [composed for 1 January 1582].

Girard, Philippe, *Quelque chose* (Paris, Etienne Prévosteau, 1587).

[Des Prez], *Tout. Au Tout-Puissant* (Paris: Guillaume Auvray, 1587).

Fonteny, Jacques de, *Personne* (Paris: Pierre Hury, 1587).

[La Guesle, Jacques de], *Polimetrie, ou le Moyen contre, tout, quelque chose, & rien par I. M. D. L. G. Auverg.* (Paris: Mathieu Guillemot, 1588).

Demons, Jean, *La Demonstration de la quatriesme partie de Rien, et Quelque chose, et Tout avec la quintessence tiree du quart de Rien & de ses dependances contenant les preceptes de la saincte Magie & devote invocation De Demons. Pour trouver l'origine des maux de la France et les remedes d'iceux, dediee à la ville d'Amiens* (Paris: Etienne Prévosteau, 1594).

Demons, Jean, *La Sextessence diallactique [sic] et potentielle tiree par une nouvelle façon d'alambiquer, suivant les preceptes de la saincte Magie & invocation de DEMONS, Conseiller au Presidial d'Amiens* (Paris: Etienne Prévosteau, 1595).

[Anon.], 'Sipeu que rien', in: *Nihil. Nemo. Quelque chose. Tout. Le moyen. Si peu que rien. On. Il.* (Caen: veuve Jacques Le Bas, 1596); and: *Nihil. Nemo. Aliquid. Quelque Chose. Tout. Le Moyen. Si Peu Que Rien. On. Il.* (Paris: Etienne Prévosteau, 1597).

[Anon.], 'On', in: *Nihil. Nemo. Quelque chose. Tout. Le moyen. Si peu que rien. On. Il.* (Caen: veuve Jacques Le Bas, 1596); and: *Nihil. Nemo. Aliquid. Quelque Chose. Tout. Le Moyen. Si Peu Que Rien. On. Il.* (Paris: Etienne Prévosteau, 1597).

[Anon.], 'Il', in: *Nihil. Nemo. Quelque chose. Tout. Le moyen. Si peu que rien. On. Il.* (Caen: veuve Jacques Le Bas, 1596); and: *Nihil. Nemo. Aliquid. Quelque Chose. Tout. Le Moyen. Si Peu Que Rien. On. Il.* (Paris: Etienne Prévosteau, 1597).

[P. G. P. Molinensis], 'Aliquid', in: *Januaria sive aliquid pro strenis ad Molinenses* (Paris: Etienne Prévosteau, 1597).

[Anon.], 'Rien' (second French translation of Passerat's poem) [1597?], in: *Rien. A Henry De Mesmes pour Estraine. Traduict du Latin de Iean Passerat, en françois. Quelque Chose. Tout* (Paris: Etienne Prévosteau, n.d.).

Bèze, Théodore de, 'In nihilo J. Passerati', in: *Poemata varia* (Geneva, 1597).

[R. de B.], 'Le Bon-jour', in: *Le Bon-iour de R. de B. en reponce aux Nihil. Nemo. Quelque chose. Tout. Le moyen. Si peu que rien. On. Il.* (Paris: Etienne Prévosteau, 1599).

Götz, Cornelius, *Disputatio de Nihilo: quae non est de nihilo, vagans per omnes disciplinas* (Marburg, 1608).

Goclenius, Rudolphus, 'Nihil', *ibid*.

Sturmius, Caspar, 'Nihil', *ibid*.

Thalmullerius, Georgius, 'Nihil', *ibid*.

Portus, M. Aemilius, *De Nihili antiquitate et multiplici potestate tractatus* (Kassel, 1609).

Guillimann, Franz, 'Aliquid', in: *Nihil. Aliquid. Nemo.* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Johann Strasser, 1611).

Kepler, Johannes, *Strena, seu De nive sexangula* (Frankfurt, 1611).

Pithopaeus, Ludolphus, 'ἈΠΟΘΕΩΣΙΣ ΚΑΙ ΟΥΔΕΝΩΣΙΣ Noviveteris Cornucopiae Nihili Utopiensis' [composition dated 1583], in: *Lusus poetici excellentium aliquot ingeniorum, mirifice exhibentes Neminem, Nihil, Aliquid, Omnia.* (Hanau, 1614).

Köler, Christoph, 'Aliquid', in: *Lusus poetici excellentium aliquot ingeniorum, mirifice exhibentes Neminem, Nihil, Aliquid, Omnia.* (Hanau, 1614).

Rittershausen, Konrad, 'Omnia' poems [composition dated 1605], in: *Lusus poetici excellentium aliquot ingeniorum, mirifice exhibentes Neminem, Nihil, Aliquid, Omnia.* (Hanau, 1614).

Remus, Georgius, 'Eidyllion … Omnia' [composition dated 1605], in: *Lusus poetici excellentium aliquot ingeniorum, mirifice exhibentes Neminem, Nihil, Aliquid, Omnia.* (Hanau, 1614).

Szenczi Molnár, Albert, 'Omnia' poems [composition dated 1605], in: *Lusus poetici excellentium aliquot ingeniorum, mirifice exhibentes Neminem, Nihil, Aliquid, Omnia.* (Hanau, 1614).

Chemnitius, Paulus, 'Ad Omnia … Hecatontastichon' [composition dated 1605], in: *Lusus poetici excellentium aliquot ingeniorum, mirifice exhibentes Neminem, Nihil, Aliquid, Omnia.* (Hanau, 1614).

von Blansdorf, Johann, 'Omnia […] Strena ad Cunradum Rittershusium' [composition dated 1605], in: *Lusus poetici excellentium aliquot ingeniorum, mirifice exhibentes Neminem, Nihil, Aliquid, Omnia.* (Hanau, 1614).

Sizmannus, Theodorus, 'Omnia' epigrams [composition dated 1605], in: *Lusus poetici excellentium aliquot ingeniorum, mirifice exhibentes Neminem, Nihil, Aliquid, Omnia.* (Hanau, 1614).

Musselius, Jacobus, *Quinta essentia de Nihilo prolata & demonstrata in oratione publica* (Wittenberg, 1624).

Mauricius, Benedictus, *Principium Principiorum Aliquid: In celeberrima Universitate Lipsiensi, Oratione Publica Commendatum a M. Benedicto Mauricio Altorphino-Norico, SS. Theol. Studioso, Die XXIII. Februar. Anno, quo Omnes populi expetunt aliquid* (Leipzig, 1628).

Schupp, Johann Balthasar, *Xenium, sive de usu et praestantia Nihili* (Marburg: N. Hampelius, 1639).

Lichtius, Franciscus. *Asserta veritas genuina nihili* (Antwerp, 1642).

Lichtius, Franciscus. *Nihil sub sole novum, sive asserta veritas genuina nihili* […] *editio altera, aucta et emendata* (Antwerp, 1647).

Schoock, Martin, *Tractatus philosophicus de Nihilo. Accessit eiusdem argumenti libellus Caroli Bovilli: atque Johannis Passeratii accuratissimum poema De Nihilo, cum annotationibus necessariis eiusdem Schoockii* (Groningen: widow of E. Agricola, 1661).

Texts in manuscript only

[Anon.], 'NIHIL. Pro xenio. Kal. Januar. Ad Aulum', in: *Album Joannis Rotarii* Rijksuniversiteit Gent, Centrale Bibliotheek, MS. 2465, fol. 128ʳ <https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/rade004albu01_01>.

Chrestien, Florent, 'In Nihil Passeratii' & 'Aliud', Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS. Dupuy 837, fol. 90ᵛ < https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10034198n>.