



## The construction of the lyrical self and nihilism. Baroque conceptions and the philosophy of Kierkegaard in *Nostalgia de la muerte* by Villaurrutia.

La construcción del yo-lírico y el nihilismo. Concepciones barrocas y la filosofía de Kierkegaard en *Nostalgia de la muerte* de Villaurrutia.

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### ABSTRACT

The present work is an interpretation of *Nostalgia de la muerte* by Xavier Villaurrutia based on some interconnected philosophical concepts from the Baroque, Idealism and Nihilism, notions that conceive the subject (lyrical ego) as locked in itself, without the possibility or the need of coming into contact with the outside. These notions threaten the integrity of the subject and support its reconstruction regardless of the outside world. The work of the mexican poet is influenced by the concepts of horror vacui (Pascal) and the monad (Leibniz); it shows affinity with the idea of the subject as an absolute and as nothing (Hegel), and with the dialectical constitution of the subject in times of nihilism (Kierkegaard).

**Keywords:** Comparative literature. Mexican poetry of the 20th century. Constitution of the subject. Baroque philosophy. Nihilism.



## RESUMEN

El presente trabajo es una interpretación de *Nostalgia de la muerte* de Xavier Villaurrutia a partir de conceptos filosóficos interconectados del barroco, idealismo y nihilismo, que conciben al sujeto (yo-lírico) encerrado en sí mismo, sin posibilidad o necesidad de entrar en contacto con el exterior. Estos conceptos ven amenazada la integridad del sujeto y plantean su reconstrucción sin consideración del mundo externo. La obra del poeta mexicano está influenciada por los motivos del horror vacui (Pascal) y de la mónada (Leibniz), y muestra concordancias con la idea del sujeto como absoluto y como nada (Hegel) así como con la constitución dialéctica que plantea Kierkegaard.

**Palabras clave:** Literatura comparada. Poesía mexicana del siglo XX. Literatura comparada. Constitución de sujeto. Filosofía barroca. Nihilismo.

*Eine der philosophisch gefährlichsten Ideen ist, merkwürdigerweise, daß wir mit dem Kopf oder im Kopf denken. Die Idee vom Denken als einem Vorgang im Kopf, in dem gänzlich abgeschlossenen Raum, gibt ihm etwas Okkultes.*  
Ludwig Wittgenstein (1967, p.105)<sup>1</sup>

Cultural history narrates the development of the subject as an extension of its interiority. One reason for the withdrawal of the individual to his own interior is that, with modernity, the exterior is considered increasingly contingent and therefore threatening. However, the contingency of the outside arose, paradoxically, thanks to its objectification, by which the world became foreign to the subject.<sup>2</sup> Positivist thinking wiped out all narratives of the world of things. For this reason, Octavio Paz emphasizes that, in the Modern Age, "strangeness ceases to be a loss and becomes exemplary"

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<sup>1</sup> "One of the most dangerous philosophical ideas is, curiously, that we think with our heads or in our heads. The idea of thought as a process in the head, in a completely enclosed space, contains something occult." (All translations of the proverbs are from the author of the article.)

<sup>2</sup> In the cultural history of Jean Gebser's evolution of consciousness, modernity—or the mental age, as he names it—it is characterized by the opposition of an internal subject to an external world. The Swiss philosopher established three epochs prior to this mental epoch: archaic, magical and mythical (Gebser, 2011, pp.71-172), in which one cannot yet speak of a subject or the subject is not yet in direct opposition to the outside.



(Paz, 1990, p.10). *Nostalgia de la muerte* of Xavier Villaurrutia can be interpreted as the end point of this development: Everything is interior. For the subject, for the lyrical self, the exterior of the world of things is completely abolished, for it is a meaningless world. This literary text seems to be, on a first reading, the result of the development of modern thought, in which the *reductio scientiae ad mathematicam* distinguished the subject from the object, expelled the narrative myth and, at the same time, the meaning of the world. The external reality became unreal for the human, therefore, the world seems to him more and more a dream – a recurring literary and philosophical motif from the Baroque.

But in a world devoid of meaning, man also does not recognize himself and is no longer able to constitute himself as a subject. Thus, also the subject itself, not only the external, became strange by its objectification, by "the reification of all relations between individuals" (Adorno, 1990, p.43).<sup>3</sup> A consequence of economic, biological-positivist and linguistic thinking is, then, the questioning of the idea that the subject is a stable metaphysical unit.<sup>4</sup> This state of doubt is called nihilism.

Also in *Nostalgia for Death* is present this process of devaluation of the meaning of the outside followed by the devaluation of the identity of the self: According to Ramón Xirau, this follows, in Villaurrutia's work, the detachment of objects from the world, "the experience of a total uprooting of consciousness itself, of a radical depersonalization" (Xirau, 1955, p.32). The fragmentary character of the anthology of poems that makes up *Nostalgia of Death* underlines the loss of unity and identity of a meaning; metaphor for the loss of identity and unity of the expressed subject. But at the same

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<sup>3</sup> "[...] die Verdinglichung aller Beziehungen zwischen den Individuen [...]" (The Spanish translation is by the author of the article).

<sup>4</sup> This is one of the main arguments in Michel Foucault's book. *Words and things*. Foucault names the three discourses of the nineteenth century that create man and the subject, the biological, linguistic and economic discourse: "When natural history becomes biology, when the analysis of wealth becomes economics, when, above all, reflection on language becomes philology and this is erased, *discourse* classic in which being and representation found their common place, then in the deep movement of such an archaeological mutation, man appears with his ambiguous position as the object of a knowledge and a subject he knows [...]" (Foucault, 1968, pp.303-304). These scientific discourses threaten man and the subject with extinction: "All these contents that his knowledge reveals as external to him and older than his birth, anticipate it, collapse on it all its solidity and cross it as if it were nothing more than a natural object or a face that has to be erased in history" (Foucault, 1968, p.305).



time —as will be seen below— the subject is constituted from a dialectical mechanism and is affirmed from the concept of fear of nothingness and death.

Literary interpretation is the simulation of the search for an original meaning. And each poetic text refers to a philosophical significance. "[T]he essence of poetry rests on thinking," says Heidegger (2001, p.210). For an approach to this original sense, the relationships between literary and philosophical concepts have to be demonstrated or plausible. The purpose of this essay is to describe the philosophical background of Nostalgia for Death, the concept of total interiority and the crisis of the subject in a nihilistic environment.

It has been affirmed in several analyses the importance of the Baroque for Villaurrutia, the influence of the poetry of the Golden Age is shown in the construction of the poems, the hermeticism of the themes, the abundance of images, the sublime metaphors, the characteristic and use of adjectives (Palma, 2001) and, above all, in the motif of "poetry as the only reality in the dream of existence" (Millares, 1996, p.1046). Although there are numerous studies on Nostalgia for Death, its relationship with the concept of the Baroque monad has not yet been addressed. In this work we will analyze the motive of the subject closed in on himself (like a monad) to which it is impossible to reach a knowledge of himself and the world around him. This theme that could also be called existentialist, is evident in Nostalgia for death, but this article also seeks to build a connection with the philosophy of the founder of existential thought, with Kierkegaard.

The purpose of this work is not, in the first instance, to demonstrate an influence —the result is speculative—but to add to the interpretations of Nostalgia for Death a reading from the Kierkegaardian concept of spirituality or *inwardness*<sup>5</sup> and its dialectical concept of the constitution of the subject. Some allusions to Hegel's philosophy serve as a bridge between the philosophy of the Baroque and that of Kierkegaard. The references in the footer to texts by Rilke, mediator between the Danish thinker and Villaurrutia, will complete the reconstruction of this intertextual network.

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<sup>5</sup> Existentialist translator, philosopher and theologian Theodor Haecker uses the word *Innerlichkeit* (*inwardness*) to characterize the philosophy of Kierkegaard (Haecker, 1913).



## Baroque concepts in *Nostalgia de la muerte* of Xavier Villaurrutia

The night in the "Nocturnes" is the metaphorical time that signifies the absence of meaning and identity. In the darkness and in the silence, the lyrical self remains alone with the empty space. There are no visible things. The subject realizes this existential emptiness in the night, for it throws him upon himself. Seclusion creates in the lyrical self the sensation of an "immersion in the depths of an unknown ocean" (Moretta, 1976, p.48), in the emptiness of the vast ocean outside and, at the same time, in the deep ocean of one's own soul. The intertwining of the subject (I-lyric) and the environment (sea) comes from Baroque philosophy and lyrics; the ideal expression of this relationship is the poetic oxymoron. Oxymoron, hyperbole and hyperbaton are also expressions of the irrationality of the thought that there is something (the subject) that is surrounded by nothingness (the world of objects) and that is why it is also nothing (Palma, 2001, p.127).

That Villaurrutia shares the Baroque's fascination with this subject and with the rhetorical figures mentioned, is shown in the epigraph of Michael Drayton (1563-1631) in *Nostalgia for Death*: "Burned in a sea of ice and drowned amidst a fire" (Villaurrutia, 1974, p.265).<sup>6</sup> It is a fragment of the LXII sonnet of *Idea* by the English author. In the introduction to this cycle of sonnets you can read: "My verse is the true image of my mind" (Drayton, 1908, p.67).<sup>7</sup> And the first sonnet begins with the description of an odyssey: "LIKE an adventurous sefarer am I, / Who hath some long and dangerous voyage been" (Drayton, 1908, p.68).<sup>8</sup>

The oxymoronic and dialectical figures in *Nostalgia for Death* are as follows: The night is associated with knowledge, it "makes us hear" (p.44) and at the same time the impossibility of knowing is expressed through the metaphor of blindness: "it is not the night but blindness / what fills our eyes with shadow" (p.52). The lyrical self's fear of nothingness is omnipresent, although, at the same time, it welcomes the nothingness of the night, the "pleasure that reveals" (Villaurrutia, 1974,

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<sup>6</sup> "Burned in an ocean of ice and drowned in fire." (The Spanish translation of this and the following two citations are from the author of the article.)

<sup>7</sup> "My poem is the true image of my mind."

<sup>8</sup> "I am like an adventurous sailor / who had a long and dangerous journey."



p.44). The lyrical-voice is described as independent of the lyrical-self, but this voice is simultaneously captivated within the self:

I'm afraid of my voice  
and I seek my shadow in vain.  
Will that shadow be mine?  
without body what is happening?  
And mine the lost voice  
what is the street burning?  
(p.46)

Another oxymoronic thematic figure is that the lyrical yo-is lost in the night of the "Nocturnes" as in a huge sea; at the same time, the interior of the subject consists of this empty sea.

### The lost soul in a wide space

*O und die Nacht, die Nacht, wenn der Wind  
voller Weltraum uns am Angesicht zehrt [...].*  
Rainer Maria Rilke (1991, p.441)<sup>9</sup>

A soul has been shipwrecked within itself, like the baroque souls in Quevedo's Sueños (1627), Góngora's Soledades (1613) or in the poetry of Sor Juana (Millares, 1996, p.1044). The sea within which the subject has been shipwrecked is, as Octavio Paz puts it, "a space without names or limits" (Paz, 1989, p.471). Space has no name because the world of things no longer communicates with humans, as mentioned before. This distance from things finds its expression, in Villaurrutia, in the desperation of the human because the stars no longer speak to him:

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<sup>9</sup> "Oh and the night, the night, when the wind full of universal space consumes our face [...]."



[C]uando in the solitude of a dead heaven  
forgotten stars shine  
and the silence is so great  
that suddenly we would like him to speak.  
(Villaurrutia, 1974, p.51)

The reference to the stars is a classic topic of ancient culture. The stars still spoke to greek thinkers. Pythagoras answers the question of the meaning of his life with a reference to the study of the heavens. Reproached for neglecting his family and homeland, Anaxagoras defends himself by referring to celestial bodies: "There is my home" (Jäger, 1942, p.49). Even in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, man's connection to the universe remains intact. Dante receives from his master Brunetto Latini in the hell of the Divine Comedy (1321) the advice to follow his stars, "thus you will arrive at the port of fame" (Alighieri, 1994, p.68). Marsilio Ficino asks the reader in his Book on the Sun and Light (1494) to raise his gaze to the sky created by God with a strict order and to allow himself to be "narrated" the history of this order by celestial relationships (Ficino, 1999, p.5). Since ancient times there is the idea, "that the structure of the universe is ordered by harmony [...], that there is a music whose modes are the elements" (Steiner, 2013, p.62).

The world appears as a cosmos, as a "community of things" (Jäger, 1942, p.159) subject to order and justice. The rationalization of Western thought begins with the reading and interpretation of the nature of this cosmos. Meteorology is the science of exegesis of things, both external and in heights.<sup>10</sup> When man's destiny is in the stars, man only has to read them carefully enough to know his future. From this reading, the external logic penetrates into the interior of man, the logic of the interior is created from the interpretation of the exterior. But with the creation of rational man, the concept of universal truth also takes hold and the truth of the external fades. The disappointment, expressed by Villaurrutia, that things no longer "speak" with the subject, that the correspondence of

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<sup>10</sup> "What art, what method, what practice gets us where we should go? [...] Here, then, are those destined for the ascent: the born philosopher, the musician, the lover" (Plotinus, 1982, p.225).



the logic of the exterior and the interior is suppressed, is, as already mentioned, a characteristic feature of modernity.

With space without borders arises the horror and fascination of the baroque human being before a new concept of the infinite. But this infinity not only describes the macrodimension of outer space, but also the microdimension of the depth of human consciousness. The modern subject is lost in these two dimensions. Francisco de Quevedo has coined for this loss in infinity the metaphor of the "floating flame in the cold water" (Quevedo, 1948, p.814). According to the French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal, "all things have come out of nothing and are carried to infinity" (Pascal, 1967, p.23), that is why "we are in a vast environment, always uncertain and floating, pushed from one extreme to the other" (p.25).<sup>11</sup> In *Nostalgia for Death*, the emptiness and silence of an eternal space and the absence of the development of actions or thoughts are expressed in the same way. In the poem "Nocturno solo", the lyrical yo-refers to the emptiness of this space with "liquid shadow in which I sink / emptiness of thought" (Villaurrutia, 1974, p.50). In "Nocturnal Fear", the world seems to the lyrical yo-shadows "of a deserted street [...] livid mirror of solitude" (p.45). "Nocturne in which nothing is heard" evokes the impressions of infinite solitude in an abandoned city, a "solitude without walls" (p.47).

## The soul, a monad

*[D]ie Seele .... ist ein weites Land*  
Arthur Schnitzler (1962, p.280)<sup>12</sup>

For Pascal, infinity not only extends outward, towards the infinitely large of the visible universe, but also inward, towards the infinitely small of the invisible universe. In fragment 72 of his *Pensées* (1897)

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<sup>11</sup> "Nous voguons sur un milieu vaste, toujours incertains et ottants, poussés d'un bout vers l'autre" (Pascal, 1897, p.17). Villaurrutia came into contact with Pascal's thought through, for example, the essay by the French writer Jean Prévost "Pascal's Miscalculation of Bet". He mentions it in his article "Contemporary French Essayists" (Villaurrutia, 1974, p.694).

<sup>12</sup> "[E] soul ... it's a wide space."



he expresses a shudder at the eternal silence of these infinite spaces and then adds that man is not able to comprehend either the nothingness from which he came or the infinity in which he is submerged. And since all things were born out of nothing and lead to infinity, they probably remain a mystery—which signifies the beginning of distrust in perception. When, from Galilei and Newton, mathematics begins to dominate all the techniques of knowledge acquisition, the gap between sensitive perception and rational perception of the environment widens more and more. As a consequence of this process, the subject becomes more and more separated from the material environment, since he no longer trusts his senses; his reason "is always disappointed by the inconstancy of appearances" (Pascal, 1967, p.25).<sup>13</sup>

The distrust in perception and fascination with the infinite is expressed, in the philosophy of the Baroque, with the concept of the monad —which in antiquity also served to represent the absolute by means of the image of a point within a circle (**Image 1**)—. In it, the aforementioned motif of the self that is submerged in an infinite ocean that is its own interior is also present —a motive that, as has been seen, is of great importance in *Nostalgia for Death*—. The monad can not only be described as a world: every consciousness is a monad -every consciousness is something absolute-.<sup>14</sup> Leibniz imagines that consciousness as an infinite narrative told by God and governed by the logic of infinitely small steps of causes and effects. The monad as consciousness needs neither window nor door to be able to communicate with the outside (Leibniz 2001, p.106) because it contains the whole narrative of the world, including all the other monads: "The world is wrapped in each subject and exists only wrapped in each subject" (Deleuze, 2006, p.152). Therefore, the lyrical *yo-of Nostalgia for Death* can be interpreted as a baroque monad closed in itself, because on the outside there is nothing. For this reason, Octavio Paz calls Villaurrutia's poetry "a solitary poetry for the lonely" (1986, p.3).

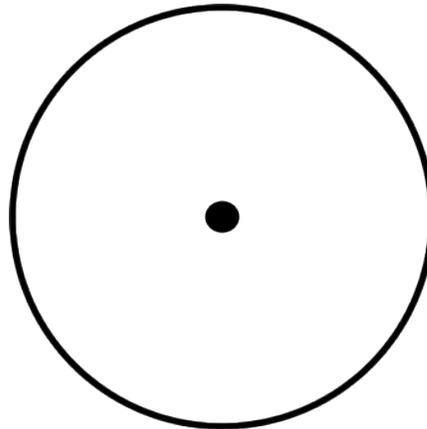
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<sup>13</sup> Regarding the distrust of what is perceived sensitively and regarding the confinement of the human in his own interior see, for example, Arendt (2002, pp. 252-257) or Heisenberg (1955, pp.17): "Anstatt mit objektiven Eigenschaften [...] finden wir uns mit den von uns selbst erbauten Apparaten konfrontiert, und anstatt der Natur oder dem Universum begegnen wir gewissermaßen immer nur uns selbst."; "Instead of being confronted by objective properties, we find ourselves confronted by the apparatuses we have built, and instead of nature or the universe, we find ourselves, so to speak, only ourselves." (The translation is from the author of this article.)

<sup>14</sup> "[T]he simple substances or created monads could be called Souls [...]" (Leibniz, 2001, p.110).



**Image 1:**



The point inside a circle —symbol of the monad as the absolute in antiquity—

**Source:** Own creation

But also the inner world of the subject enclosed in himself is contingent. The contradiction that the impulse to seek truths is inherent in the human, even though he knows that no clear idea of anything can be reached, is expressed by Pascal as follows:

If we come up with a term to which we intend to link and in which we think to strengthen ourselves, it hesitates and abandons us; and if we follow it, it slips out of our hands, slides and flees us with an eternal escape. Nothing stops for us. It is the state that is natural to us, and yet the most contrary to our inclination; we burn in desire to find a firm headquarters and a constant last base [...] (Pascal 1967, p.25).

The skepticism towards a correct and sure knowledge is also present in Nostalgia for death: in "Nocturne of a statue", the lyrical yo-seeks the source of a cry, but never finds it ☹ what there are always are "only" shadows of truths, the truth itself hides behind echoes, walls and mirrors:

Run to the statue and find only the scream,  
want to touch the scream and just find the echo,  
want to grab the echo and find only the wall



and run to the wall and touch a mirror.

(Villaurrutia, 1974, pp.46-47)

Life without any recognizable solidity or a constant basis has to seem to the human —which depends on its stability—something irrational and like a dream.

### Life is a dream

*[T]he man who lives  
he dreams what he is until he wakes up.*

Calderón de la Barca (1989, p.98)

The most obvious motif that Villaurrutia takes up from Baroque poetry is that of life as a dream and that of death as true life. The Shakespearean Macbeth complains—confronted by the death of his mistress—about the somber character of life with the following words:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing. (Shakespeare, 1925, p.1124).<sup>15</sup>

And poets such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Rainer Maria Rilke or The Contemporaries transported this metaphor of life as a dream of the Baroque (by Calderón de la Barca p.ej.) to the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> The baroque motif of the gloomy reality is found in the repetition of the word "shadow" in the first three poems of Nostalgia for Death. In the first two ("Nocturne" and "Nocturne Fear") he

<sup>15</sup> "Life is just a walking shadow, a bad actor / who struts on stage / and then nothing is heard. It is a fairy tale narrated by an idiot, full of noise and fury, / which means nothing" (The translation is by the author of the article).

<sup>16</sup> The drama *La torre (Der Turm, 1928)* by Von Hofmannsthal is an adaptation of *Life is a dream*. In the first part of the *Sonetos a Orfeo (Sonette an Orpheus, 1922)* of Rilke there are four stanzas that deal with a girl who sleeps in the ear of the lyrical yo-and dreams the outside world of it (Rilke, 1991b, pp.487-488).



appears twice, in the third ("Nocturne Scream") four times. The lyrical yo-of "Nocturne of the statue" dreams of all things of the world around him: "the night, the street, the staircase" (Villaurrutia 1974, p.46). But not only does he dream of the world, a dream that "wants to escape" from the forehead of the lyrical yo-of the poem "Nocturno preso", but also he himself is dreamed by another.<sup>17</sup> These others who dream of the lyrical yo-are named angels in the "Nocturno" with the same name. When these beings sleep, who fly "at ground level", "they dream not of angels but of mortals" (Villaurrutia 1974, p.57).

In the poem "Nocturno miedo", Villaurrutia evokes –through several oxymoronic figures suitable for the theme– the image of sleepwalkers and the grotto of sleep to unmask life as a dream and death as an awakening:

Then, with the passage of an awakened sleeper,  
Aimless and without object we set off.  
The night pours upon us its mystery,  
And something tells us that to die is to awaken.  
(Villaurrutia, 1974, p.45)

For Baroque philosophy, night and sleep are of great importance in terms of the possibility they represent of attaining knowledge. Many times the dream, the little brother of death, is the awakening to the truth.

The young René Descartes had, one night in 1619, three dreams that defined his path. He left behind all his beliefs and his future philosophy was based on the content of these dreams. In one of them, Descartes dreams that he wakes up and that from his eyes come rays of fire that allow him to see clearly the things around him.

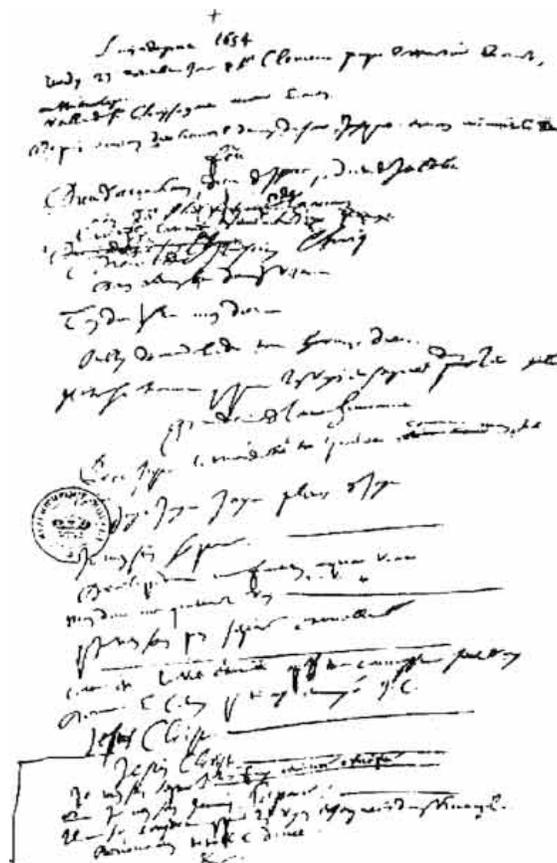
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<sup>17</sup> The Villaurrut idea that the dream of the lyrical self wants to be free or that it is already loose from the self, strikingly anticipates the theory of the discourses of postmodernity mentioned above in reference to Foucault. Discourses are narratives that cross the subject and constitute it, but since they are independent of the subject, this is only like a dream of another entity (linguistics).



One night in 1654, Pascal found his truth. The night gave him a knowledge that depends neither on empirical perception nor on non-empirical reason. Pure darkness revealed pure light, pure truth—as in the case of Descartes—through "fire": The truth of the greatness of God and the "greatness of the human soul." This nocturnal truth could not be proclaimed in a philosophical-scientific text; the French philosopher wrote it down in a quasi-poem, in his Memorial (**Image 2**).

Image 2



The Memorial by Blaise Pascal  
Source: *Oeuvres de Blaise Pascal* (Ed. Léon Brunschvicg)



The poetic discovery that life is an exile and that nothingness, which is represented by death, is the true homeland, is expressed in "Volver", one of the most concise poems quoted in *Nostalgia for Death*. As Pascal put it, death—which is nothingness—signifies the absolute principle of being; therefore, when he dies, the subject returns to this absolute principle, to his homeland: "To return to a distant homeland [...] Nothing is my distant homeland" (Villaurrutia, 1974, pp.69-70). The reality of life is, then, nothing more than a shadow, just a dream. But it is no longer the shadow of real-life objects or Platonic ideas, but the darkest shadow of nothingness.

As death is more real than life, it "always takes the form of the bedroom / that contains us" (Villaurrutia, 1974, p.60). In the Baroque the question arose, how is an interaction possible between subjects who are conceived as monads? How does the human mind interact with the material aspect of the world?<sup>18</sup> For Leibniz, for example, God is the mediator between monads.<sup>19</sup> In times of nihilism, the answer has to be different. Villaurrutia answers poetically: since death is more real than life, this—and not love or God or both, love dei—is the basis, the law of the possibility of relationships between subjects:

So, only then, the two of us alone, do we know  
that not love but dark death  
rushes us to see each other face to face with each other's eyes,  
and to unite and strengthen ourselves, more than alone and shipwrecked,  
even more and more and more, still  
(Villaurrutia, 1974, p.61).

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<sup>18</sup> "L'homme est à lui-même le plus prodigieux objet de la nature; car il ne peut concevoir ce que c'est que corps, et encore moins ce que c'est qu'esprit, et moins qu'aucune chose comme un corps peut être uni avec un esprit" (Pascal 1897, p.19); "Man is, for himself, the most prodigious object of nature, because he cannot conceive of what it is to be a body, let alone what it is to be a spirit and, less than anything else, how a body can be united with a spirit" (Pascal, 1967, p.23).

<sup>19</sup> "But in simple substances the influence of one Monad on another is only ideal, which can produce its effect only through the intervention of God, whereas, in the ideas of God, a Monad postulates, with reason, that God, in regulating the remaining ones from the beginning of things, takes it into account. For, since a created Monad cannot physically influence the interior of another, there is no other means but this by which one can depend on another" (Leibniz, 2001, p.120).



Death unifies because it does not distinguish, it is "dark", and it enables interaction between humans in a life that is a dream. If true life is death, in that life everything is equal and unified. All the infinities of that sphere of death are equal, as Pascal (1967, p.25) would say: There are no distinctions in particularities. And the shadow of this law about the false world is the axiom that allows the connection between the individual monads that are the subjects.

The oxymoronic motive of life as a dream and of death as real life positions, as has been seen, the transcendental interior of the subject as the only ontological truth. The reality of the outside world is practically abolished for this reason.

### **Idealism, interiority and nothingness**

In the course of modern times, the truth is, then, found, more and more within. For Immanuel Kant, the character of things was not understandable, but the impression obtained through the senses was still important, since, without it, the categories of pure reason would be meaningless.

The nineteenth century, the century of nihilism, is dedicated to the prolonged development of the interior. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was influenced in his description of the subject by Leibniz's *Monadology* (Horn, 1965). But for the idealist philosopher, the absolute being, which is at the same time the subject, is not exclusively a dialectic but also, ultimately, nothingness.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the darkness of the night in Villaurrutia's work not only means the absence of everything in a common sense, but also in a dialectical sense. According to Hegel, both absolute darkness and absolute light mean emptiness. Only a mixture of darkness and light allows you to see.<sup>21</sup> But in the night of complete

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<sup>20</sup> In the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Compendium*, Hegel writes the following: "§ 86 ... Yes *be* is expressed as a predicate of the absolute, thus obtaining the first definition of it: *The Absolute* it is the being. [...] § 87 Now, that pure being is the *pure abstraction* and therefore the *absolutely negative* which, taken equally in the immediate way, is the *nothing*; in fact, such a definition is implied when it is said that the thing-in-itself is the indeterminate, which simply lacks form and content. [...]" (Hegel, 2005, p. 189). "§ 86 ... Wird *Sein* als Prädikat des Absoluten ausgesagt, so gibt dies die erste Definition desselben: *Das Absolute ist das Sein*. [...] § 87 Dieses reine Sein ist nun die *reine Abstraktion*, damit das *Absolut-Negative*, welches, gleichfalls unmittelbar genommen, das *Nichts* ist. 1. Es folgte hieraus die zweite Definition des Absoluten, dass es das *Nichts* ist; in der Tat ist sie darin enthalten, wenn gesagt wird, dass das Ding an sich das Unbestimmte, schlechthin Form- und damit Inhaltslose ist, [...]" (Hegel, 1979, pp.182-183).

<sup>21</sup> "Pure light and pure darkness are two voids that are the same thing. Only in the given light—and the light is determined by the darkness—and therefore only in the clouded light, can something be distinguished; as well as only in the



darkness, the lyrical yo-of Villaurrutia's work begins to see in a different way. Go without eyes. He understands in the absolute darkness of the night, in "Nocturne in which death speaks", that the principle of all being is nothing: "Nothing is the sea", "nothing is the earth", "[n]ada are these things" (Villaurrutia, 1974, p.54). According to the principle of dialectics, through these reflections on nothingness something is created. Something internal. The transcendental subject of the lyrical self is created.

Hegel saw in subjectivity, in the structure of self-reference, the "beginning of the new time" (Habermas, 1985, p.17). For the philosopher, interiority was the "Protestant principle" (Hegel, 1979, p.120). The inward path is also intimately connected with Protestantism: With the propagation of each individual's reading through typography, fewer and fewer people need the others to communicate, as they interact only with their own interior: "Reading (Latin: *legere*) has always meant in its medieval etymology *intus legere*: Reading inside, in the heart."<sup>22</sup> It is above all Hegel who highlights, through the reference to Descartes, the principle of interiority as the axiom of modern philosophy *per se*.

This thought, which is for itself, this purest apex of interiority, asserts itself and makes force as such, relegating to the background and rejecting as illegitimate the dead exteriority of authority. Only the free thought that is housed in me can recognize and corroborate, as a competent court, thought. Which has, at the same time, the sense that this thought constitutes a general mission of the world and of individuals, even more, the duty of each one, since everything is based on it; in such a way that what in the world passes for something firm and

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determined darkness—and the darkness is determined by light—and therefore in the lightened darkness [it is possible to distinguish something], for only clouded light and lightened darkness have in themselves the distinction and are therefore a determined being, a [concrete] existence" (Hegel, 1982, pp.120-121). Original: "Reines Licht und reine Finsternis sind zwei Leeren, welche dasselbe sind. Erst in dem bestimmten Lichte – und das Licht wird durch die Finsternis bestimmt –, also im getrübten Lichte, ebenso erst in der bestimmten Finsternis – und die Finsternis wird durch das Licht bestimmt –, in der erhellten Finsternis kann etwas unterschieden werden, weil erst das getrübte Licht und die erhellte Finsternis den Unterschied an ihnen selbst haben und damit bestimmtes Sein, *Dasein* sind" (Hegel, 1999, p.55).

<sup>22</sup> "Lesen (lat. *legere*) hat in seiner mittelalterlichen Etymologie immer schon *intus legere* bedeutet: im Innersten, im Herzen lesen." (Haas, 2011, p.107). (The translation is from the author of this article.)



unshakable, has to be considered so by the thought of man, so that it is recognized as such (Hegel, 1955, p.252).<sup>23</sup>

As Octavio Paz points out, Villaurrutia had knowledge of the doctrines on the art of Hegel and Kant. Despite the Mexican poet's distrust of philosophical systems—the distrust he shares with Kierkegaard—he read Benedetto Croce's essay, *The Living and the Dead of Hegel's Philosophy* of 1907 (Paz, 2003, p.44).<sup>24</sup> In this study, Croce highlights the importance of opposites for the system of the German philosopher, in which the synthesis of these is not an illusion, but characterizes a movement, a development. For Hegel, the truth is not being or nothingness, but disappearing from one to the other – becoming. All reality is development, which Hegel calls "history." One can only speak of spirit within its historical development. Outside of it is nothing. For Hegel, self-awareness is a temporary result of the dialectic between independence and subjection. The ego is always formed through the recognition of others, depending on something opposite.<sup>25</sup> In *Nostalgia for Death* the Hegelian dialectic is present, that constant duality of self-consciousness. On the one hand, the lyrical self recognizes that everything is nothing, even its own subjectivity. Such nihilism is a metaphor for Hegelian independence. On the other hand, with this recognition and with the writing of the poems of *Nostalgia for Death*, a subject is formed, the lyrical self. This refers to Hegelian dependence. The formation of this lyrical self in the poetic text is then a constant dialectical process that wanders

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<sup>23</sup> Original: "Das allgemeine Prinzip ist jetzt, die Innerlichkeit als solche festzuhalten, die tote Äußerlichkeit als Autorität zurückzusetzen, für ungehörig anzusehen. Nach diesem Prinzip der Innerlichkeit ist nun das Denken, das Denken für sich, die reinste Spitze des Innersten, diese Innerlichkeit das, was sich für sich jetzt aufstellt; und dies Prinzip fängt mit Descartes an. Es ist das Denken frei für sich, was gelten soll, was anerkannt werden soll; dies kann es nur durch mein freies Denken in mir, nur dadurch kann es mir bewährt werden. Dies hat zugleich den Sinn, dass dies Denken allgemeines Geschäft, Prinzip für die Welt und die Individuen ist: das, was gelten, was festgesetzt sein soll in der Welt, muss der Mensch durch seine Gedanken einsehen; was für etwas Festes gelten soll, muss sich bewähren durch das Denken" (Hegel, 1979, p.120).

<sup>24</sup> However, Octavio Paz also reiterates that the influence Villaurrutia received from reading on Hegel's theories was superficial.

<sup>25</sup> See the chapter "Independence and subjection of self-awareness, lordship and servitude" in the *Phenomenology of the spirit* (Hegel, 1966, pp.113-120).



between the poles independence and dependence — a student of Hegel, Søren Kierkegaard takes up this concept.

### **Kierkegaard and Villaurrutia: philosopher and poet of interiority in times of nihilism**

Kierkegaard is not Xavier Villaurrutia's favorite philosopher.<sup>26</sup> But through the poet Rainer Maria Rilke as "mediator", it is possible to draw a connection between the Danish philosopher and the Mexican poet – and this connection has to do with the idea of the dialectical constitution of the subject in the times of nihilism. The literary relationship of Villaurrutia's work with that of Rilke is clearly demonstrated (Vasconcelos, 1994).<sup>27</sup> And Rilke, in turn, was greatly influenced by Kierkegaard's texts.<sup>28</sup> The Prague poet highlights above all his concept of inwardness, which was used to describe a "truly internal" human (Rilke, 1950, p.33).

Kierkegaard—in connection, above all, with Hegel's idealism—linked his concept of existence to the idea of the subjective thinker: "The reflection of interiority is the double reflection of the subjective thinker. Thinking, he thinks the general, but as soon as he exists in this thought and

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<sup>26</sup> That philosopher is Martin Heidegger. Octavio Paz mentions Villaurrutia's relationship with the texts of the German thinker (Paz, 2003, p.68). For an analysis of Heidegger's influence on the Mexican poet's work see H. Weber, 2019, pp. 205-214.

<sup>27</sup> The Mexican poet wrote a short essay on the work of the Praguense. In it he describes the encounter with *The notes of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910) of Rilke as one "definitive, indelible and not surpassed after reading how many works of Rilke [...]" (Villaurrutia, 1974, p.949). Octavio Paz highlights the differences between the two poets regarding the theme of death: "From the German poet almost certainly comes the idea of 'own death', but the Rilkean conception of death is very different from that of Villaurrutia. For Xavier — Latino, Catholic and Mexican — death was not a pretext for metaphysical flights but a reason for recollection and acceptance. Despite his love for French letters, his tradition was Hispanic, both stoic and Christian: death is the end of this life and, for Christians, the leap to the other, the eternal. Heir to neo-romanticism and symbolism, Rilke faces death but not to accept it to the Stoic or to transcend it to the Christian but to transform it. Death is not a limit or a transit but an opening [*sic*]; with it and in it begins the great metamorphosis that leads us to unity: life and death are the two faces of the same reality" (Paz, 2003, p.67).

<sup>28</sup> As he confesses in a letter to Ilse Erdmann: "[T]he is to dwell in it, it is *pathos*, voice and lonely landscape, an infinite claim of the heart, a dictation, a thunder and a silence, like the stillness of the flowers [...]. Original: "[I]hn lesen heisst in ihm wohnen, er ist Pathos, Stimme und einsame Landschaft, ein unendlicher Anspruch ans Herz, ein Diktat, ein Donner und eine Stille, wie die Stille der Blumen [...]" (Rilke, 1950, p.33). Kierkegaard's painful relationship with Regine Olsen is for Rilke the starting point for his theory of the unloved that is found so much in *The notes of Malte Laurids Brigge* as in the *Elegias of Duino*. Regarding Rilke's relationship with Kierkegaard's texts, see also Lisi (2013) and Cardinal (1969).



acquires it in his interiority he isolates himself more and more in his subjectivity" (Kierkegaard, 2010, p.82).

For Kierkegaard, truth is "non-material" (Adorno, 1979, p.60). To the Danish flâneur reality appears "only reflected by mere interiority" (Adorno, 1979, p.62). The real (external) world has become so strange that authors in the first half of the twentieth century create "an internal space" to "spare the subject a false step" (Adorno, 1990, p.44).<sup>29</sup> The shipwreck is pre-programmed inside when things no longer speak to man, when the soul suffers a shipwreck in the silent space of the external. The nihilism of his time and the emptiness of all external and internal values is manifested, for Kierkegaard, in the concept of the public and in the praxis of the mass media — an analysis also very prophetic, if one thinks of the most recent trends in communication networks. To this process of annihilation of the individual to become public, the Danish philosopher named it "levelling": "Levelling at its maximum is like the stillness of death, where one can hear one's own heartbeat, a stillness like death, into which nothing can penetrate, in which everything sinks, powerless" (Kierkegaard, 1962, p.51). Nostalgia for death can undoubtedly be interpreted as the poetic expression of the last state of this process of annihilation of all values, of the moment of total immobility, of the situation without any hope in humanist progress – a state that, in the twentieth century, was the basis of existentialist theory.

## The concept of fear

*Ich habe etwas getan gegen die Furcht.*

*Ich habe die ganze Nacht gesessen und geschrieben [...].*

Rainer Maria Rilke (1991c, p.121)<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> The interior of the Danish protagonist [i!] in the novel *The notes of Malte Laurids Brigge* it is so extensive that it covers the whole world (of the text). "Ich habe ein Inneres, von dem ich nicht wußte. Alles geht jetzt dorthin", says Malte about it (Rilke, 1991c, pp. 110-111): "I have an interior that I have not known. Everything is now directed there." (The translation is from the author of the article).

<sup>30</sup> "I did something against fear. I sat all night and wrote [...]."



The existentialist theme is more noticeable in the first part of *Nostalgia for Death*, in the "Nocturnes". Villaurrutia traces in them "an itinerary of dissolution of the entity, understood as what remains and endures, until concluding in silence, until returning with the word impossible the word" (Maldonado, 2010, p.101). In the "Nocturne Fear," the existential preoccupation of being nothing is expressed through the anguish of being just an empty body:

The fear of being but an empty body  
that someone, myself or anyone else, can occupy,  
and the anguish of being outside of oneself, living,  
and the doubt of being or not being reality (Villaurrutia, 1974, pp.45-46).

The interior of the lyrical self is formed, above all, by the perception of this emptiness of space and is also threatened by it. The night in the "Nocturnes" is the time-place that can be interpreted as a metaphor for the absence of meaning, progress or identity.<sup>31</sup> In the Baroque, the logic of the monad (Leibniz) or faith in god (Pascal) rescues the subject from the threat of emptiness. And in the century of nihilism, Kierkegaard imagines the constitution of subjectivity as follows:

The position of the lyrical self of *Nostalgia for Death* changes, not only with respect to the theme of death, but also with respect to the motive of fear: It is no longer the fear that arises from insecurity related to the meaning of death for existence. The lyrical self now fears nothingness as a dominant principle of life. Kierkegaard describes life as a disease consisting of fear of death which, in nihilistic times, means the dissolution of the individual into nothingness.<sup>32</sup> The lyrical self of *Nostalgia for Death* is threatened by that great nothingness and this threat finds its expression in fear.

But for Kierkegaard, this fear is at the same time an expression of man's self. It is the only possible proof of his free will and therefore of his freedom, as he describes it in *The Concept of Fear* (*Begrebet Angest*, 1844). Here and in *The Deadly Disease* (*Sygdommen til Døden*, 1849), Kierkegaard

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<sup>31</sup> Also the subject Malte Laurids Brigge, in his exile Paris, consists of sensations of a space without significant furniture, and his reflections and self-reflections deal with death, which in times of nihilism is associated with no "personal" quality.

<sup>32</sup> "If in the strictest sense we are to speak of a sickness unto death, it must be one in which the last thing is death, and death the last thing. And this precisely is despair" (Kierkegaard, 1941, p.24)



conceives the being of the individual as a becoming, as a dynamic process (Patios, 2013). Since the subject is determined by his free will and fear is the expression of this subject who has in front of him a future of free decisions, this sequence of free decisions is his essence. And the sequence of free decisions can be named history. Man is made of history and, at the same time, creates this story.<sup>33</sup> For Kierkegaard, self-awareness does not mean self-observation—Husserl and Sartre will later, for different reasons, agree with this—and becoming and not being is the prevailing ontological category. Self-awareness can only consist of action.<sup>34</sup> "To be a self" means, according to Kierkegaard, the creation of that self through time. With this, the human creates at the same time his history (Patios, 2013, p.45) and, in a broader sense and connected with the notion of culture, the concept of history in general.

Only where the future – which is the most important time for Kierkegaard – is full of free choices along with their consequences, is fear, a sign of the soul according to the Danish philosopher. Even if the reason for the anxiety of the lyrical self of *Nostalgia for Death* is not directly related to decisions about his future, but to the suspicion that everything, including his self, is nothing, is constituted and revealed, thus, a subject. In this Kierkegaardian interpretation of Villaurrutia's text it is precisely the fear of nothingness that "can occupy", as the Danish philosopher puts it, that expresses something, that expresses the soul.

If the beginning of *Nostalgia for Death* is determined by the fear of nothingness and death, then this fear itself is a test of the individuality of the subject. With such certainty, fear loses its real state and is transformed into longing due to intellectual effort. The lyrical self of *Nostalgia for Death* also comes to the rational understanding of the cause of his fear in the last poem "Tenth Death". "It is the anguish of thinking / that since I die I exist" (Villaurrutia, 1974, p.70). The self is expressed in this fear and in this thought. In the same poem, the knowledge of death as an existential basis is also

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<sup>33</sup> In *The notes of Malte Laurids Brigge* the connection between subjectivity and history is shown in the form of the annotations that make up the novel: It is a journey into the mythical past of humanity.

<sup>34</sup> "This self-consciousness is not contemplation, for he who believes this has not understood himself, because he sees that meanwhile he himself is in the process of becoming and consequently cannot be something completed for contemplation. This self-consciousness, therefore, is action"(Kierkegaard, 1980, p.143). Kierkegaard insists a lot on the *praxis*, which appears to be a rebellion, like Marx's, against the theorist Hegel.



expressed as "consciousness": "This lucid consciousness / of loving the never seen / and of expecting the unforeseen" (p.70). The lyrical self of Nostalgia for Death reacts against external and internal nothingness and, by aestheticizing and rationalizing it, stands above it as a free subject.

For Kierkegaard, the increase in knowledge through the idea that nothingness is the center of human existence means an improvement in self-knowledge and self-esteem: "The law for the development of the self with respect to knowing [...] is that the increase of knowledge corresponds to the increase of self-knowledge, that the more the self knows, the more it knows itself" (Kierkegaard, 1980, p.31). With the analysis of anxiety, Villaurrutia's poetry acquires a discursiveness that has an effect on the constitution of the lyrical self. He is no longer a castaway wandering in the sea of his own consciousness. Now, a self-confident subject becomes present through intellectual and discursive effort. Through this effort he understands the cause of fear and the expression of death and, therefore, nothingness as the only absolute. The self relates — paradoxically, since this relationship contemplates nothingness as a parameter — with itself consciously, confirming itself.

### **The dialectical constitution of the subject**

In relation to Hegel, Kierkegaard proposed man as the process of a relationship of two contradictory poles. In Nostalgia for Death one can see a development similar to that which runs through Kierkegaard's work: While in *Begrebet Angest* fear is at the center of the subject's existence, its nature is considered, later in *Sydommen til Døden*, dialectically. Kierkegaard rejects the determinism of systematic thought; his philosophy of spirituality and his leap of faith toward God is more like Pascal than the rationalist-idealist philosophers. But in the description of the constitution of the subject a dialectical system similar to that of Hegel is visible.<sup>35</sup>

The parameters on which the self is constituted are, for Kierkegaard, the modes of despair.<sup>36</sup> On the one hand, in the subject there is the desperation to be identical to himself. This despair is

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<sup>35</sup> For Kierkegaard, knowledge must be connected to life and the reality of personal existence. Therefore, abstract and non-edifying knowledge is for a Christian "joke and vanity" (Kierkegaard, 1941, p.5).

<sup>36</sup> "It is not a rare exception that one is in despair; no, the rare, the very rare exception is that one is not in despair" (Kierkegaard, 1941, p.21).



expressed in the desire to be nothing. In the case of disease, for example, wanting to die, but not being able to do so.<sup>37</sup> Despair can also be defined as the longing to be free. On the other hand, life is the desperation of being nothing and wanting to be a subject.<sup>38</sup> In these types of despair the basic relationship of the constitution of the self is expressed. In *Nostalgia for Death*, these two forms of despair are manifested, as already mentioned before, with the lyrical self that expresses fear in the face of nothingness (and wants to be something), but at the same time seeks the nothingness of the night (and wants to be the knowledge of the whole). Kierkegaard thinks of the self, in connection with Hegel, as the synthesis of the factors of that relation: This synthesis is also the relation of the "finite" and "infinite" factors to which the relation of "determination" and "freedom" logically corresponds. The result of a relationship is a difference, a negative thing. But for Kierkegaard, the self cannot be a negative thing. He defines it, then, as the relationship of the relationship with himself, which can be presented as a positive factor: "If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self." A self is conformed, then, by the negation (relation) of the negation (relation) of its being. I, presented as positive, is therefore the relationship of the negative of oneself with the negative of oneself. Self-identity is, therefore, the relationship of the negative of your being with the negative of your own being. Also in *Nostalgia for Death*, two negativities are dialectically related—the emptiness of the outside and the emptiness of the interior of the subject—to positively constitute the lyrical self.

The lyrical self is an ego that is also defined by its negativity, nothingness and death. The longing to die is expressed in the desperation of not being able to reach itself in this synthesis. At the

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<sup>37</sup> Or, as in the case of the parable of the prodigal son in *The notes of Malte Laurids Brigge*, experiencing self-identical being as a limitation and wanting to be free through nothingness. Regarding an interpretation of the parable in *The notes of Malte Laurids Brigge* see Hamburger (1970).

<sup>38</sup> *The notes of Malte Laurids Brigge* they present these two types of despair outlined by Kierkegaard: In the beginning, that of being nothing and wanting to be someone. And in the end, in the parable of the prodigal son, of being someone, but wanting to be nothing. The parable of the prodigal son can be understood, through a Kierkegaardian reading of Rilke's text, as the formula of all despair: The lost son wants to get rid of himself, he wants to annul the identity that society attributes to him: "To despair over oneself, in despair to will to be rid of oneself, is the formula for all despair [...]" (Kierkegaard, 1941, p.56). The prodigal son Rilkeano does not want to be loved because the unloved do not have an established identity, which allows them to be all at the same time.



same time, recognition and despair are expressed because the self is walking towards its annihilation, towards nothingness. The two despairs that manifest themselves in a Kierkegaardian reading of *Nostalgia for Death* are the desperations of the ego for not being able to reach the desired states.

The self is, therefore, its own behavior regarding these relations of temporality and eternity, determination and possibility. It is constituted by how it behaves with respect to these relationships and how it is reflected in them. The lyrical self of *Nostalgia for Death* relates to himself through his reflections on nothingness and death and, therefore, postulates himself positively as a subject. He overcomes his fear and comes, through reflection, to the conclusion that death is a non-separable part of life; in this way it is constituted as a subject:

And what life would be that of a man?  
that he would not have felt, for once even,  
the precise sensation of death,  
and then his memory,  
and then their nostalgia?  
(Villaurrutia, 1974, p.69)

It is not something sensitive that is expressed in the now, nor is it something expressed in the memory of history, in timelessness. The self is established from the relationship between its determination in the now and its freedom in timelessness. Despair is, for Kierkegaard, an expression of man's inability to raise the forces working on him to a rational level. Despair is, then, the non-realization of a relationship that relates to itself. The artist (the lyrical self of *Nostalgia for Death*) finally succeeds in this endeavor. In this sense, *Nostalgia for Death* can also be read as the expression of this hermeneutic of the self, in which, in the course of the anthology of poems, the lyrical self understands itself as a relationship that relates more and more clearly to itself.

The relationship between determination and freedom is of great importance to the act of creating (and receiving) works of art in general—it is important to the question of what literature is. As Terry Eagleton highlights in his book on philosophy of literature *The Event of Literature*, (2012)



human freedom does not mean that the subject does not possess determinants, but that the subject chooses them and adapts them for his own self-constitution. To act autonomously is not to dissociate oneself from rules, but to act according to one's own independently established laws. For this reason, art has been considered and continues to be considered as a paradigm of a free activity.<sup>39</sup> Through free choice—and in the free act of writing a poem—the lyrical self of *Nostalgia for Death* becomes independent of the determinations of reality (death, loneliness), but it is also determined in a world of meaningless things through verbal artistic creation. It is constituted as a free subject. In that sense, and modifying a phrase by Octavio Paz, poetic language makes the world habitable—even when it speaks of an uninhabitable world.

### **Nothingness and death as substitutes for god**

Faith in god is the ultimate concept that, according to Kierkegaard, forms the basis of the construction of the interior of the human ego—along with the idea of the subject as a historical subject and the conviction that the ego is a dynamic-dialectical process. For the Danish philosopher, human consciousness must have its basis in a transcendental entity that fills it. (Patios 2013, p.37). The latter concept is completely absent in *Nostalgia for Death*. Villaurrutia was a believer all his life, but only in his first creative stage are poems with a divine theme found. In *Ya mi súplica es llanto* the religious themes in the work of the Catholic poet are still noticeable. In *Nostalgia for Death*, the Catholic God is no longer mentioned.

But, even so, it is possible to interpret *Nostalgia for death* in connection with the divine. In 1925, the Jesuit philosopher and literary theorist Henri Bremond defended, with his concept of "pure poetry," the ancient connection of the lyrical form with God. The hidden and indescribable meaning of a poem is not attainable by reason, but only through a religious intuition. This sense refers to an

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<sup>39</sup> "That there are crippling limits to any such project in real life is clear enough, which is doubtless one reason why art has been so idealised a phenomenon. Because it is less constricted by the real than we are, more radically self-constituting, it seems a peculiarly pure example of an autonomy which in our case can only ever be approximate. [...] Yet the cooperative form of a poem or painting is entirely compatible with freedom, once freedom is understood positively as self-determination rather than negatively as freedom from constraint" (Eagleton, 2012, pp.141-142).



absolute meaning whose origin is divine and mystical; "each art in its autonomy shares an origin and a destiny with prayer" (Stanton, 1998, p.129). Poetry, with its veiled sense, has access to that origin. For the logo and phonocentric discourse, access is prohibited. In this sense, Villaurrutia's collection of poems also points to this divine origin, although its content categorically denies such transcendental significance.<sup>40</sup>

Nostalgia for Death expresses the absence of a god in freedom, in the performance of the human "as" if he himself were a god. It is the death that gives that analog place to the human: "Nothing is the sea that as a god you wanted to put between the two." But it is death that really replaces the omnipresent God;<sup>41</sup> the free human cannot establish distance with her, she is a constant companion, as God was before. It is the only entity that exists, since nothing is the sea, nothing the land, nothing the time and nothing the dream. If Kierkegaard proposes as the basis for the constitution of the subject a transcendental entity that is God, now that basis is a negative metaphysical entity: the nothingness that is death, which is enveloped—embraced by the subject in the times of nihilism to constitute, paradoxically, as a subject;; it is the nothingness that must be accepted almost with a gesture of joy as the basis for life.<sup>42</sup> With the substitution of God for death and Christianity for nihilism, Villaurrutia returns to death the aprioristic importance that corresponds to it.

The Berlin philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel criticized, in his essay "Metaphysics of Death" (1910) that Christianity took away its aprioristic significance to death, putting life under a vision of its own immortality (Simmel, 1910, p.59). But death not only forms life in our hour of death, it is not only the passage (as Christianity preaches) to eternal life, but a fundamental aspect of our

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<sup>40</sup> For George Steiner, poetry is close to the silence that has access to the divine: "What is beyond the word of man speaks eloquently to us of God. That is the recognition of the blissful defeat that is expressed in the poems of St. John of the Cross and in the mystical tradition. Where the word of the poet ceases, a great light begins" (2013, p.59).

<sup>41</sup> In the *Elegies of Duino* of Rilke, the god of the first anthologies of poems (*Book of images, Book of Hours*) is replaced by angels.

<sup>42</sup> As also advised by the lyrical yo-of the *Elegies of Duino* when he exclaims: "Wirf aus den Armen die Leere zu den Räumen hinzu, die wir atmen" (Rilke, 1991d, pp.441-442); "Throw already the emptiness that you gird with your arms / into the emptiness of the wind that you breathe" (Rilke, 2015, p.13).



entire earthly life. Simmel formulated before Rilke and Heidegger that death is connected to life from its beginning and from within. In that sense, the subject envelops death like the peel to the fruit.<sup>43</sup> Each step of life not only forms a temporal approach to death, but rather, life is determined by it as a real element in a positive and a priori way (Simmel, 1910, p.60). In "Nocturne in which death speaks" and in "Tenth death", death becomes something personal again for the lyrical yo-of Villaurrutia's work. When this philosophizes poetically about death it is, paradoxically, a philosophizing about the essence of the life of the subject. With such an understanding is installed, again, the idea of a personal death that constitutes the consciousness of each individual. This concept—and here the end of this essay connects to its beginning—disappeared with positivist scientific thinking. When in the great cities of the modern era death is no longer considered something personal that gives identity to the subject, when dying is no longer an act of family daily life, but is expelled to a hospital industry, it becomes the horrible unknown, it becomes absolute nothingness.

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<sup>43</sup> In the *Book of Hours*, Rilke expressed this idea of death as a fruit of life as follows: "Denn wir sind nur die Schale und das Blatt. / Der große Tod, den jeder in sich hat, / Das ist die Frucht, um die sich alles dreht" (Rilke, 1991a, p.103). "Because we are just the shell and the leaf. / The great death that each one contains, / is the fruit, around which everything revolves" (The translation is by the author of this article).



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