ON JOHN WILMOT (LORD ROCHESTER) "UPON NOTHING": A LONDON
SCHOOL STYLISTICS ACCOUNT

Analysis and comparison claims should be the way of literary criticism. —T. S
Eliot

Nothingness might save or destroy those who face it, but those who ignore it are
condemned to unreality—Demetrius Capetanakis

Most accounts of Rochester's best known poem, "Upon Nothing," it seems fair to
say, take either, sometimes both, a diachronic, and to a lesser degree, synchronic
approach to Upon Nothing—respectfully, what Rochester, in the way of the substance
and style, Rochester drew from writers of the period from 1640-1680, Cowley,
Cleveland, Waller, Clarendon and the like, plus how figures of the eighteenth-century,
Samuel Johnson, Henry Fielding and others, reacted to the poem. In all this, much effort,
most of it conjecture, has gone into fixing the character, beliefs and motives of Rochester.
Was he the "debauched, atheistical aristocrat or the repentant sinner saved only by a
deathbed conversion" (Griffin 2). Or just another satirist doing the same kind of work as
other satirists before and after him, Juvenal, Horace, Swift, Pope and so on? If we take
the personal approach of the "atheistical aristocrat" then we read the his poems to verify
our assumptions about his psychological state. If we focus on his place in the western
tradition of satirists, we turn more to his intentions, not only the intentional objects of his
texts but also to their contents and modes of—a fluid combination of the diachronic and
synchronous

ANALYSIS
My approach here, deploying a London School Stylistic analysis of Upon Nothing is mostly synchronic—what the poem means, taking it as a textual artifact, to us now, not especially what it meant to Rochester's predecessors, contemporaries or near contemporaries. With the analysis I hope to answer the question "What's at Stake in Upon Nothing? Or, "What was Rochester trying to make prominent? And by what grammatical means and what intention"? The questions are perhaps implicit in Fielding claim that "none ever hath dared to write on this subject." (qtd Griffin 266) as well as Addison's remark that "Nothing" is "an admirable poem" but on a "barren subject" (qtd Griffin 266) plus being an unintentional "ironic" poem on a "unworthy subject" (Griffin 267). But we certainly shouldn't forget Parmenides' comment, as given by Plato, that "Never shall this thought prevail, that not-being is. Nay, keep your mind from this path of investigation" (Sophist 258D).

My claim is that what is at stake with Upon Nothing is a foregrounding of the three forms of negation, crucial to all satire, negation in the realm of language, non-existence in the realm of things and privation also in the realm of things. What Rochester achieves with them is, whether he was aware of it or not, is the crucial function of negation in language and so its usefulness to a writer of satire—in short, that Rochester created a new genre, or way, of writing satire.

With Parmenides Delphic imprecation (more familiar in its short form, not-being is not) Parmenides laid down the gauntlet for 2,500 years of unresolved and no doubt unresolvable, disputation over the nature of non-existence in the realm of things and negation in the realm of language. Plato, recall, does not accept this. He has his
spokesman, the Stranger, respond to Parmenides' statement by contending that in a real sense, the things are not nevertheless are:

When we say not-being, I think not of something that is the opposite of being, but only of something different….When we are told the negative signifies the opposite, we shall not admit it; we will admit only that the particle "not" (ou) indicates something different from the words in which it is prefixed, or rather from the things denoted by the that follow the negative (Sophist 257B-C).

This "something different," is, I believe, a good starting point for the way we can read Rochester's uses of "Nothing" as well as that of "not." Paired with "something" the poem takes on the aspects of a dialectic, on one level, and a struggle, on another level, between two forces to win dominance over the other. The dialectic and the struggle take place inn three contexts, non-existence in the realm of things, negation in that of language and privation, as defined by Aristotle, also in the realm of things (Metaphysics 1046a 29–30) Aristotle's example of privation (stereisis) is blindness. Sight is a "natural" property of the eyes but blindness the deprivation, of lack, of sight—hence, a state of privation (loss of a property) in a larger whole.

So how does Rochester show and crucially use these contexts? I propose here to respond to the question using, as I mentioned earlier, a London School Stylistics analysis, one that combines a quantitative with a conventional literary analysis, the analyst employs the combination to isolate a "motivated prominence" of the author in the text (Halliday). So, adopting that strategy here, we can ask: what is Rochester making, or
attempting to make prominent, in and with "Nothing." Is it, as I said above, a new genre of satire?

Presupposed here, however else we might want to classify the poem, we take it as a textual artifact. Thus we assume that it is worthwhile to examine how the text creates points of emphasis and importance with precise patterns in its grammatical structure.

London School Stylistic tries to combine quantitative linguistic analysis with traditional literary interpretation, partly in order to add to the former's relevance and the latter's substance. A stylistic analysis of "Nothing" will, hopefully, enable us to see how at the textual level the text is able to manufacture such a rich interpretative web from ostensibly gossamer materials.

"Nothing" has only 387 words generating 51 lines and 17 stanzas.

The stylistician M.A. Halliday observes that motivated prominence is frequently generated by the repetition of words, clauses and groups of related words or "lexical sets" (112-14). The salient lexical set in "Nothing" is the "something" (repeated four times) that equates with words like "all," "what" one. The words "all," "what," "is" and others bring to the foreground form and substance. As the Platonic "something different" are the repetition (five times) of "Nothing," a noun, with "nothing," a pronoun. Their reference is to non-existence in the realm of things. Non-existence is has particular significance by its titular status, Upon Nothing." The title describes the poem as a subject of inquiry, not from the usual something, but from the point of view of the something different of nothing. "nothing." The precise choice leaves the comparison based upon prominence, and importance, rather than just the appearance of a linguistic unit. The single appearance of "negative" ("Great Negative" stanza 10) falls within the more than 2,000 year
classification of "negation in the realm of language" (Horn). Its function, expressed
primarily by "not" (9 repetitions), is foregrounded by the lines "how vainly would the
Wise/Enquire, define, distinguish, teach, devise?/Didst thou not stand to point their dull
Philosophies" (stanza 10). The whole stanza makes prominent, a crucial given for
linguists and philosophers of language, that without the negatives, in its forms of "no,"
"not," "never" and the like plus privatives like Rochester's "'undistinguished" (stanza 8)
"shade" (stanza 1) or "boundless" (stanza 3) language would not exist—only
communication by body language.

The nominal lexis "Shade" (stanza 1) makes its appearance, as does "shadow"
(not asserted in the poem) as a "hole in the light," the product of a presupposed triad (1)
source of light, (2) caster of the shade and (3) shade—for example, sun:tree:shade, in
which "tree" serves two functions, as a blockage of the sun and a caster of the shade.
Note that these two functions occur at the same temporal moment, in a single nominal
unit predictor of what's to come next and conveyer of information (Sorensen).

In the London School questions are taken as the expression of ignorance and as a
"what if? conditional or "what might be." The question, "how vainly would the
Wise/Enquire, define, distinguish, teach, devise?" (stanza 10) then makes another form of
non-existence. Without the category "what if" we cannot speak of choice. Every action,
in this case defining, distinguishing, teaching and devising, require the possible. To
understand an event as an act, we have to understand it in relation to possibilities that
were not, in fact, realized. That which has been chosen is always seen in the light of that
which has not been chosen. What has not been chosen equates in this case with the
Platonic "something different." Both "what is, 'what has been chosen, and the what is
"different," are equally prominent from the perspective of the subject, "Nothing" and its consequences. What is and what is not, but could be (call to mind Hamlet and his "to be/or not to be" soliloquy) equate easily with each other. thus the subjunctive is as necessary a grammatical unit of language of the poem as is the present tense.

London School Stylistics supports the use of the rhetorical trope prosopopoeia, representing things as persons or vice versa well as etymology as a "thought category" (see "dachte Kategorie" in Curtius 495-500). The etymology of prosopopoeia makes its appears, from the Greek prosopon, which equates with "person", "face," "mask"; pros alludes to "face" or "mask"; ops comes in as "eye" and poein with "to make—hence "poet," "personification" prospective" and others. All these examples have the general meaning of "a face from the past toward the future"—in this case both a remember of the beginning and how something as everything will end. Here Rochester brilliantly nails the beginning and the end with two agentive nouns, "Ending" (stanza 1) and "end" (stanza 17), each occurring, respectively, in the first and last stanzas.

Nothing! thou Elder Brother ev'n to Shade. That hadst a Being ere the World was made. And (well fixt) art alone, of Ending not afraid.

....

The Great man's Gratitude to his best friend

Kings Promises, Whores Vows, towards thee ("Nothing)

they bend . Flow swiftly into thee, and in thee every end.(emph mine).

"Nothing" is here represented as infinite and "something" as finite. The infinitude of "Nothing" equates with the 2,000 years and more treatment of the negative and non-
existence as indivisible, untouchable (it has no surface) and soundless. "Nothing" as silence equates with the modern notion of a heat death of the universe:

The laws of thermodynamics doom the universe to a heat death.

Everything everywhere will end in silence. (Sorensen 290)

So how does the grammatical structure foreground Rochester's deployment of inprosopopoeia in the text? "Nothing," and to a lesser degree something, are given personhood by pronominal substitutions, "thy" "thee," "thou" by nouns, clauses and sentences like "foe" (stanza 6 and 7), "Elder Brother" (stanza 1), "hand" (stanza 4), "womb" (stanza 7), "bosem" (stanza 8), "Matter, the Wickedst offspring of thy Race" (stanza 5), "thy Reverend dusky face" (stanza 5) and most of all by agentive verbs, like "begot" (stanza 2), "Snatcht" (stanza 4), and "drives back" (stanza 7).

The personhoods, as well as their differing personalities, of something and Nothing, implies action. And action implies choosing and assuming to be free to act. Traditionally, choosing to act (think of Adam and Eve) implies that we have some control over our will, to decide and plan what our act should be. or the lack of it, determinism. Here the challenge for Rochester was to construct a narrative of the "something different" existing with something and nothing. With words like "must," a modal agentive, verb (stanza 3) the noun "fate" (stanza 11) plus the sentence "Tho' Mysteries are barr'd from Laick Eyes" (stanza 8), Rochester suggests determinism rules the universe, not free will. In the absence of free will, nothing new is to happen. In fact, nothing could happen for there is no ground or source of the new.

Yet, (paradoxically/) with human and non-humans, "Men, Beasts, Birds….politicians, monarchs, the wise," the will rules. The prominence of their willing
appears with Rochester's use of optative/agentive verbs "begot," 'snatch'd" "flew" and the like as well as pronominal substitutions, "thee," "thou" "thy," suggesting a blind failing agency of "men," "beasts," "fire," "land" But note, because of the lack of a coherent self, tall the agents of the poem lack of awareness of their condition, a finitude doomed to die. Nothing as its salient characteristics. Paradoxically, Nothing, or "'is not," is here represented as both creative and destructive. Nothing "begot something, but is now out to destroy something. As a whole the movement of the poem comes through as a temporal event from "before," to "after" and to "now."

The poem abounds in optative verbs transitioning into agentive ones—desire into action as an execution of desire. From "begot" comes the creation of something, "the general attribute of all" The desires of both Nothing and something, though differing in intensity, play out in a power struggle—with the noun "foe" twice represented as a war. Sentences like "When primitive Nothing Something straight begot" (stanza 2); "Something did they mighty power command" (stanza 4); "Snatch'd men, beats, birds, fire, air and land" (stanza 4). something, created from Nothing, frees itself from " the "fruitful Emptiness's hand" of Nothing (Stanza 4). The rhetorical trope, oxymoron, "fruitful Emptiness" relates only to Nothing, not something. Something's creative power resides only in Nothing's willingness to release it, temporally, from Nothing's well "fixt" state.

In London School Stylistics what is made explicit, asserted, with the grammatical structure of a text and what is implicit, presupposed or alluded to, by the structure. Relationships are an important example. In Nothing the asserted relationship, the main focus of this essay, is that between Nothing and something, the "is/is not" of the power
relationship between an infinite Nothing and a finite something (stanza 11). The "is no" of Nothing is supported, and promoted, primarily by the titular status of Nothing and its later three-fold repetition. (Note that the pronominal status and usage of "nothing" (Stanza 13) does not have the same standing of the nominal No-thing. The value "nothing," the pronoun, lies only in its anaphoric function, occasioned by the rhetorical need to refer to a previous lexis, clause or sentence).

Another way of putting the above is via the act of naming. When we name something it appropriates and subordinates things to our will—hence the fixed status of Nothing and something. Neither can be different than they are due to the act of the god-like narrator/author, a being presupposed but not asserted, exophoric (present but not named, classified or categorized, but a supreme Being "speaking the world into existence?). This suggests that if we were all god-like beings we would, after naming some things but not all, fall silent, as the God of Genesis does. Silence implies, depending on its function a text like "Nothing," either presence or absence, a static or agentive agent. This warrants giving a god-like status only to the author/narrator of "Nothing" the silence that that "hadst a Being ere the world was made" (stanza 1) and the silence that follows the end of the poem after everything of something "Flow swiftly into thee, and in thee ever end" (stanza 17). What ends presupposes of necessity what begins. What begins Nothing is, of course, the imperative "Nothing!" As an imperative it foregrounds an intentional content, intentional mode and an intentional object. In other words "Nothing!" has the general intention of "waking up" or "making speak" something that has been either silent or asleep. (The same argument, we recall, is the first word of Beowulf, Hwæt!). Are we not then encouraged to picture an erstwhile sleeping Nothing
awakened by a hitherto silent god? That not only is Nothing being awakened but also the reader to not only what coming but what's also at stake here. As long as Nothing stays silent or asleep so must satire stay asleep or silent?

I mentioned above the power struggle, twice characterized as a war of "foes" (stanzas 6 and 7) between Nothing and something. How do the linguistics of the text motivate the prominence of such struggle? To answer this we have to, with a close reading of the poem, pay special attention to Rochester's deployment of verbs and their satellite nouns and pronouns. In this is perhaps goes without saying that verbs are the "sun" of the grammatical solar system of every textual artifact. The verb "selects" its satellite nouns, pronouns, adverbs, but they do not voluntarily allow themselves to be selected. They are forced by the author to join with verbs in order to enhance the precision, scope and prominence of the verbs—If we, to consider the opposite, meet with a structure such as "the table laughed" and forced to give it a meaning of some kind, what we do is to interpret "table" as if it were abnormally animate, as dictated by the verb. What we do not do is to interpret "laughted" in an abnormal way as if it were a different kind of activity, performed by inanimate objects. A noun, to a London School Stylistician would say, is like a planet, whose internal modifications affect it alone, and not the solar system as a whole. A noun is peripheral to the verb. Every sentence of Nothing then contains a verb. In fact one might want to say a verb, unless (rarely) it is a single verb, a sun without a stellites. (see Chafe 96 ff.).

The warlike nature of Nothing and something makes its appearance in stanzas 6 and 7. The controlling verbs in 6 are the intransitive "join" and "combine." Their intransitivity makes their satellite nouns, "Form," "Matter," "Time and Place" agentive
nouns and Nothing a passive object. This suggests that Rochester has invented the nouns, as he has with Nothing, personhood which equates with the ability to live reason, chose. But the principal verbs of stanza 7, all agentive-transitive ones, "assists" "brib'd" "drives back" reverse the Nothing (object) something (subject) in stanza 6 to Nothing (subject) something (object). With this the text declares, as one would expect, that Nothing annihilates something and its properties, "time," "matter," "form," "place" and so forth to win the "war." Notice that the "victory" is implied by the possessive pronoun "thy (repeated 7 times ), the direct address, first person, of the narrator to Nothing versus the indirect, third person, description of something. Something appears as a "thing," Nothing as a person, albeit not with all the qualities of a real-world person.

With the "war" over, at stanza 7, the narrative transitions from foregrounding negation in the realm of things, to negation as privation and negation in the realm of language, linguistic negation—in short, from the emphasis on ontology to emphasis on language, information, the presence and use of truth and falsity via "is, or is not" (stanza 11) and "true or false, the Subject of Debate" (stanza 11).

Rochester, who had an MA from Oxford was, more or less likely, with the views of Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas—assuming Rochester attended the proper lectures, logic, classical and medieval, or was somber when he did —on the alleged nature of truth that "To say of what is that it is not or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not it true" (Aristotle Categories 14b15 ); "adaequatio intellectus et rei, secundum quod intellectus dicit esse, quod est vel non esse quod non est which may be translated "truth is the adequation of things and he intellect" (Aquinas); "true belief is directed toward what is, false belief is directed toward what is
not (Socrates, *Theaetetus*, see also *Sophist*). All of these equate with Rochester's "*is, or is not."

Notice that Rochester's discourse on truth and falsity, which runs from stanzas 11 to 17, are not confined to one location, duration or one individual. They encompass both the public and private realms, infinite time and universal propositions. Through the strategic deployment of repetition of pronouns like "thee," "thou" "thy," (especially in stanzas 9 through 15), roles given by agentive verbs, "tak'st away," "pray," "perfect, or destroy," and the like. Meaning is not reduced to just either truth or falsity but actually takes in both, something *is* truth as well as Nothing *is* false—locked in a struggle for dominance with Nothing the "thee" that "ever ends" all things except itself (stanza 17).

Does this "*is, or is not," truth, falsity, mean to remind the reader of Hamlet's "to be or not to be"? Perhaps. But more likely it was his awareness of the power of the "to be" verb.—in which and by which existence, location, duration and finally truth and falsity come to be (Kahn).

**COMPARISON**

As long as there has been an awareness of negative metaphysics (negation in its three forms) there have been more reluctant apostles of it than advocates. It goes against the natural grain of human thought to give any credence to the Parmenidean *not being is not*. The irreducibility of negative truths, facts and actions to positive ones was conceded by those who were most invested in the reducibility. When the founder logical atomism, Bertrand Russell, admitted at Harvard in a lecture that negative facts exist, he claims that a riot almost happened. If there is any reduction to be achieved, it runs from positive truths to negative ones. This suggests that it is more promising to analyze, and use,
positive truths, facts, actions and so on as the negations of negative ones. Failure, death, poverty whatever are examples of the negations of negative truths.

The basic problem in that negative statements, facts, and propositions are more powerful than positive ones. Knowing how things are not or don't exist gives one knowledge of exhaustiveness. If there is any reduction to be made, it goes from positive to negative facts and statements. One example is to use a kind of double negation to say that the cat is on the mat is to say that there is no negative fact of the cat not being on the mat. The absences of absences are a major part of the ontology of Nothing as non-existence in the realm of things.

Negation, nothingness as well as their "family members," the "void" "black holes," "emptiness" "vacuum" "failure," "zero" and others, generally speaking, are repugnant to poets, readers and other writers as they are to ordinary folks. They all have a strong intuition that reality is fundamentally positive. But from a logical and rhetorical point of view, negations provide a more powerful reductive, forceful, comprehensive and dramatic base and "feel" than a positive one. Of the 10 commandments, recall, 6 are negative statements. They are more memorable.

If we compare Rochester with other satiric poets we have to admit, however grudgingly, that he excels, with the possible exception of Swift, all others in the deployment of negative information. As we would expect, agentive verbs followed by privative nouns (nouns that lack parts or properties that could be there) convey the "message" of Nothing as well as his other satires. Stanzas 10 and 11 are salient examples.

If comparison is made between "Nothing" as a component of satire plus that of others, Dryden, Pope, Swift and the like, one has to begin with some idea of what satire
not only is but what it does and avoids what it could do—in all its intentionality as revealed through its three part structure, intentional content (its whatness), intentional mode (its howness) and intentional object (what’s at stake?). Each of these "intentions," it seems fair to say, involve "risk assessment" followed by either risk taking or risk aversion—in all the idea that the reception of what we write will be more than a whim of the gods and we are not passive before human follies, evil acts.

There is a fair amount of criticism on the name and nature of satire in English, especially of the period from the mid-1600s to the mid 1700s (Jack, Lockwood, Parker and others). None of it, to my knowledge, has its intentionality appear via the grammatical structure of the text, or a plain text-linguists analysis. Instead there is usually a three-part ontology via the etymology (history) of satire (intentional content), the "voice" of the satirist (intentional mode) and its "target" (intentional object).

Much of this can be reduced to three foundational units, namely public versus private, what is (the status quo) versus what should be and not be plus how the alleged satiric text "touches" the reader and provokes a response as naming, characterizing and judging. Adjectives like "biting" "bitter" "cutting" are the rule as well as clauses and sentences like "Swift's satire is all about what is and what is not meant to be taken seriously"; "Dryden, Cowley and Sterne's gain meaning by a violation of the 'proper function' of ordinary discourse"; "Restoration drama, saturated with Epicurean ideas, satirizes society with characters who 'collide' with each other and "swerve" from a predictable goal to an unpredictable one."

All forms of writing involve risk, in its three dominant forms, risk taking, risk avoidance and risk management. The ability to define what may happen in the future to
our writing and to choose among alternatives lies at the heart of composition. We choose words, clauses, sentences from among alternatives that might have been more appropriate than the ones chosen. What is chosen can only be replaced, through revision, but even this is risky. There might be better ones than the ones produced. There are better revision that make you feel good. But the numbe of them that would make you feel bad is infinite. All this is somewhat analogous to calculating probabilities in real life risk taking—farming, investing in the stock market or getting married.

From this we might conclude that there are two main types of writers, those willing to take risks and those averse to it. For the latter, it seems true to say that they hate the idea of losing, losing an audience, a career, a Nobel Prize, or writing a classic.

Writing satire would seem to presuppose a degree of risk taking not present in other types (genres?) of writing. If so, then how should the risk be managed? If a satirist is leaving everything to chance, then risk management is a meaningless concept. Invoking luck obscures the truth, because it separates the goal of satire from its cause.

Information, experience and memory of the satirist cause satire to happen. But the effects are not always the same. They can be either serious, tragic, or non-serious, comedy and tragicomedy, some mixture of serious and non-serious. Giving the name and nature of satire is partially the work of satirist in cooperation with the reader. What the satirist attempts is what he or she sees as possible, generally to convince the reader (or listener) what should be the case as a transformation of what is the case (see Aristotle Rhetoric I.2, 1355b26). In other words satire is normative. The "distress" of Ireland, in Modest Proposal and other Irish tracts, comprise what the case is for Swift.
If we agree then that Rochester a risk, or dared to, write Nothing what was the effect? Good, bad, indefinite? It is a specimen, after been read, the object of literary criticism for more than 300 years, perhaps something more than Fielding's "barren subject," something undefined?

I risk saying here that Nothing is either, for its time, a new genre, a satire in a new way or should it be regarded as a departure from a norm of satire and the attainment of new norm, or norms, for satire? One answer might be the judgment of the reader who see the text as a departure, or deviation from a certain norm, a satire that makes prominent something rather than nothing—perhaps with the title of "Upon Something"?. The "Upon Something' would certainly please Parmenides. But would it have the force of "Upon Nothing"?

If so, such a "something" would have to satisfy the condition of what might be called "the same moment." This entails the subject comi, into being with the presence of something (being) and nothingness (Nothing), in one and the same moment, with the same subject in the same word, clause, sentence, stanza—in short the copy of perfection.

In Nothing everything is made of two parts, something and Nothing. Stanzas 2, 13, 14 are examples of the convergence of the "parts" into one whole at the same moment. Supporting and sustaining the whole are pronominal repetition, "thee," "thy," and "thou" in, for instance, stanzas 4, 5, and 10. Infinite Nothing "combines" with something to become everything, a temporal moment, with a location, a united structural unit, referenced by the names of persons, professions and things.

In our imagined "Upon Something" the prominence of negation would be replaced by different forms of actualities—perhaps modeled on Heidegger's "Why is
there Something and not Nothing." Yet a "Upon Something" satire, given the same initial states as those of "Upon Nothing," the negative and the positive, would achieve and equilibrium of effects.

The convergence of something and Nothing at the same time recalls the arrival of zero in mathematics. Both zero and Nothing allow thinking to become abstract. Secondly, it provides a way of going on to the next natural number, from 10 we can go on easily to 100, to 1000 and so on.

If everything exists as a plurality, in one temporal moment, then everything begins and ends as an infinite whole, "flow swiftly into thee and ever end" (stanza 17).

Did the something/Nothing "genre" last? Was it "invented," in much the same way as calculus, at the same time by two or more different persons? Does the something/Nothing occur in post-Rochester time? A passage in Swift's A Tale of A Tub seems to echo, even copy, if not the substance of Nothing at least its spirit.

And what about this?

For the listener, who listens in the snow,

And, nothing himself, beholds

Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is

(W. Stevens, "The Snowman").

Above I suggested that Upon Nothing can be treated as a "new" genre of satire—or better, following Plato, a "something different" type. But what is this "difference?? If I say it's something different what am I agreeing to? On one hand it seems paradoxical to say that Nothing, nothingness, or absences, exist. But it is no better to say that nothingness, or absences, do not exist. This is a common predicament. St.
Augustine remarked that he knows what time is—except when someone asked him to explains what time is. Thinking about it, it seems paradoxical to say time exists, but not better to say that time does not exist. The same can be said about space, numbers and ideas.

I suggest that Rochester was aware of this paradox. He was aware that Nothing is not a form of being, any more than being is a form of non-Nothing. Yet he sensed that the existence and essence of satire both presence and absence were essential and complementary for one another. The concept, for example, of an edge to the limit of where something is and where something isn't. Presence and absences are correlative and both are involved, simultaneously, in destroying, denying and being something. Is and Is not are crucial in the formation, transmission, and verification of reality.

It well may be, as mentioned in the Wikipedia entry on Rochester, that Nothing shows the influence of Malherbe, Ronsard, Boileau, Petronius, Lucretius, Ovid, Anacreon, Horace and Seneca but a verification of the claim would require (at least in the view given here) how meaning and use (or function) are foregrounded by Nothing's grammatical structure. Of these, insofar as Rochester translated Lucretius, verification of the poet's influence in Nothing might be relatively straightforward, despite the difficulties of translation and the wide variations in the grammars of the languages.

So how does the London School Stylistics "see" the existence and essence of Rochester's "something different" type of satire? It does so, following Halliday's representation, by a deployment, by "motivated prominence," of the concepts of meaning and use (function) as given by their relationships. Halliday notion of motivated prominence is another way of describing "foregrounding"
Foregrounding, as I understand it, is prominence that is motivated. It is not difficult to find patterns of prominence in a poem or prose text; regularities in the sounds of words or structures that *stand out* in some way, or may be brought out by careful reading; and one may often be led in this ways towards a new insight, through finding that such prominence contributes to the writer's total meaning. But unless it does, it will seem to lack motivation; a feature that is brought into prominence will be 'foregrounded' only if it relates to the meaning of the text as a whole (104).

What then, is motivated to prominence, by the three forms of negation that I have identified—but only given, due to the constraints of space, in skeletal form — in Nothing, namely, non-existence in the realm of things, negation in the realm of language and privation? Parts of it would be Rochester's "reading" of his life experiences, his service in the navy, treatments (mistreatment?) by Charles II, bouts of poverty, hangovers, bad health, the lies of politicians, whores and so on. All of these embody, allot and deploy, in different ways, the three forms of negation. But only a writer like Rochester (or possibly Rabelais, Swift, Voltaire) was sensitive enough to the functions of language—made prominent through the grammars of negation—to "motivate" them to prominence.

David Vieth reads Nothing within the context of a "paradoxical tradition which developed as a corollary (from orthodox Christian theology)," the result being "the nonexistent nothing is the source of unformed raw material of all things in the Creation, without which they would not exist" (118). Is there any grammatical support for this in the poem? Is it paradoxical to say that non-existence exists? If so, what is the use in
saying it? What it all seems to imply is the one can get away with a simultaneous assertion and denial in the same place with the same subject. If so, should we then treat this as a motivated prominence of the poem?

If we make a close reading of the title "Upon Nothing" and the character of the verbs then I think the answer to the question is a qualified affirmation. No one would question, I suspect, titular status promotes prominence. Titles equate generally with theses, what is at stake, the nature of the subject, as well as raising expectations as to what's to come. But read from a syntactical point of view "Upon Nothing" has a much deeper meaning, one that has a comprehensive reach throughout the poem—as well as in the character of satire and Rochester's concern with the nature of humanity, represented by Nothing. With the sequence adverb serving as a adjective "Upon," then the noun "Nothing" an affirmation converts a non-existence into a "being." All adverbs and adjectives presuppose something not only as an existent but also latter then them. "Upon" has existed before "Nothing." So the process of constructing, as I said above, with reference to the rhetorical trope prosopopoeia, a personhood for Nothing who will function as the principal "partucipants" of the poem.

In London School Stylistics, based primarily on the work of Halliday, there are two kinds of movements (actions) used to represent participants, the "transitive" and "intransitive," those who interact with persons and things external to them versus the ones who don't—both realized mainly by transitive and intransitive verbs. "Begot" "proceeded" (Stanza 2), "Inspire, "define" "distinguish," "teach," "devise," "point" (stanza 9) all transitive control, describe, a salient feature of Nothing in the two forms of non-existence and negation in the realm of language. Something also exhibits a fair amount of
transitivity, "severed," (stanza 3), "snatched" (stanza 4) but all of the other transitive
verbs are limited to the properties of something, "Time," "Space," "Matter," "Form"
(stanzas 5 and 6). In this there is the suggestion that such properties are limited to the
realm of things and have no place, unlike Nothing, in the realm of language. Notice also
the the poem represents the beginning and end of something with intransitive
actions——the beginning with the modal verb "must" and the intransitive, "fall" (stanza 3) and the end with another intransitive, "end" (stanza 17), a verbal noun signifying
finitude.

Nowhere in the poem does something interacts with the external world as much as
Nothing does. Nowhere, consequently, does something exhibit the reality of Nothing. If
"Upon Nothing" classify as satire, than we are encouraged to believe that negation, in
its three forms, always constitutes the style and substance of satire—as given, in English
Literature, as a mixture of the Greek tradition, "satyr," and the Latin "satira, a fanciful
play of creatures half man and half animals coupled with a mixed bowl of fruit—a dash
of Lucretius and a great amount of Horace.

Yet with all that, satire remains, and will continue to remain, a fugitive concept,
an existent without an essence in which to anchor a definition. The conclusion? Best not
to see Rochester, or writers of the likes of Swift, Pope, Dryden, as satirists but as skilled
users, interpreters, and advocates of language as function, the text as a literary artifact,
the reader as a close reader of the grammar of the text as it foregrounds meaning.

In this orchards I have plucked on the low-hanging fruits. Now I go to pluck both
the low and high hanging fruit in other orchards.
Each of these approaches is perhaps most obvious and extensive in the Treglown collection of essays, "Spirit of Wit." (But see also Walker, Griffin, de Sola Pinto, and Miller).


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See Horn "The Paradox of Negative Judgment" for a detailed discussion of such an alleged paradox (45-60).