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Nihilism After Nietzsche

Nietzsche imagined that the advent of nihilism would be coterminous with the beginning of a new tragic age. He realized that the death of God and the nihilism that followed in its wake would be catastrophic, undermining European morality and unleashing a monstrous logic of terror, but despite this he welcomed its arrival in large part because he believed it would open up the possibility for the development of a harder and higher super-humanity that could overcome the decadence and degeneration that characterized nineteenth century European civilization.

While Nietzsche is often thought to have formulated the concept of nihilism, it actually has a much longer history. The term was first used in the late eighteenth century to describe Fichte's absolute egoism and the thought of his followers, many of whom constituted the core of Jena Romanticism. During this period the term was generally connected with atheism and with a rejection of all existing sources of authority by critics such as Jacobi and Jean Paul, and later by Turgenev, and Dostoevsky. They were all convinced that if the I was posited as absolute, God was nothing, and that without God all authority could have no other basis than shifting human will and opinion[1]. The problem presented by nihilism for its early critics thus arises out of an exaggeration and exaltation of human beings in place of God.

Nietzsche turned this concept on its head, arguing that the death of God was the result not of a Promethean exaltation of man but of the diminution of man brought about by the slave revolt against the master morality of antiquity. Nihilism thus had

[1] Cfr. Gillespie (1995); Arendt (1970).

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its source in Christianity, which had its most recent incarnation in democratic society. The over-man in Nietzsche's view was thus not the source of nihilism, as had long been believed, but its solution. This reversal was perhaps the most significant event in the conceptual history of nihilism and has continued to play a decisive role in the use and understanding of the concept ever since. In what follows I will give a brief summary of the genealogy of nihilism after Nietzsche, beginning with the conception of nihilism in the period before WW I. Nihilism during this period was associated with decadence and gave rise to a search for a solution in and through an exploration of the primitive, the mythical, and the unconscious. I will then turn to an examination of the nihilistic despair and apocalypticism of the of period from WW I to the end of WW II, the period in which the tragic character of nihilism was most obvious. I will then briefly examine the conjunction of nihilism and absurdity in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in France, before concluding with an examination of nihilism and irony in critical theory and postmodernism. I will argue throughout that Nietzsche remains decisive for all of these thinkers in different ways and that their responses to nihilism are shaped by his particular formulation of the concept. I will suggest in conclusion that all attempts to come to terms with nihilism are necessarily inadequate but that these efforts bring us closer to understanding the uncanny question that lies behind and drives our concern with the phenomenon.

1. Nihilism Before WW I

The period between 1889 when Nietzsche lapsed into madness and the outbreak of WW I was largely a period of peace and stability, but under the influence of Nietzsche many intellectuals perceived it as an era of decadence and decline. In the literature of the period a sense of world-weariness is palpable, and many saw this as the consequence of a creeping nihilism[2]. Like Nietzsche they looked for the antidote to the

[2] Cfr. Ascheim (1992), p. 52.

meaninglessness and purposelessness of their lives in a variety of sources, including an exploration of the primitive, the mythical, the wild, the unconscious, and the irrational.

The impact of Nietzsche was particularly evident in the elegant nihilism of the 1890s as exemplified in the works of Oscar Wilde and his circle. Lionel Johnson, who called Omar Khayyám the "minstrel of smiling nihilism" was typical of this generation. He was deeply disturbed by the atheism of his contemporaries, but like many of those who enjoyed the decadence of the time, he saw no other solution to nihilism than death. Similar although more vigorous sentiments are found in the work of Henry Adams and Henry James, as well as Gabriele D'Annunzio (*The Virgin of the Rocks*, 1894-1895). A similar critique of the decadence and nihilism of bourgeois life is also apparent in the works of August Strindberg (*The Ghost Sonata*, 1907), as well as Thomas Mann (*Death in Venice,* 1913), as well as in the work of the members of Stefan George's circle.

Not all were satisfied to merely describe the nihilism of their times. Another group of thinkers turned to an investigation of the unconscious or subconscious self that Nietzsche put at the center of his analysis of human beings. Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, and Carl Jung, to take only the three most famous examples, began a systematic effort to discover the unconscious well-springs of human action as a first step toward eliminating or at least ameliorating the dysfunctional psychic components of human existence. The workings of the human psyche from this point of view are not revealed by the everyday operation of man in society but by the most deeply disturbed, the neurotic and psychotic individuals who reveal what is generally repressed in ordinary life. While these thinkers moved beyond despair and resignation, they also came to believe that repression and a neurotic distortion of our natural desires were essential to civilization. Freud discussed this at length in *Civilization and its Discontents*. At its core this effort to examine the psychological roots of human behavior, these thinkers accept Nietzsche's claim that consciousness is only the tip of the human iceberg

above the water, while the reality of human existence is for the most part invisible to us.

Another group followed a more radical path, looking for an alternative that would not crush the vitalistic essence of man that manifested itself in more violent and primitive possibilities. The growing fascination with such nihilistic and primitive violence is evident in the literary works of Joseph Conrad (*Secret Agent, Heart of Darkness*), Jack London (*Call of the Wild, The Assassination Bureau, Ltd*), Robert Lewis Stevenson (*The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and the *Suicide Club*), and Knut Hamsun (*Hunger*), as well as in the art of Paul Gauguin, Henri Rousseau, and Pablo Picasso, the music of Claude Debussy and Igor Stravinsky, and the political tracts of Georges Sorel (*Reflections on Violence*, 1908), and F.T. Martinetti (*Futurist Manifesto*, 1909). The impact of this nihilistic acceptance of the value and the vitality of destructive violence also fueled actual political movements such as the socialist God-building movement of Gorky and Lunarcharsky in Russia, and the Young Bosnia movement that assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand and plunged Europe into war.

2. *Nihilism from the Outbreak of WW I to the End of WW II*

The critique of the decadence and the fascination with violence that were essential to the literary nihilism of the quarter century after Nietzsche slipped into insanity, were transmuted by war and revolution in a number of different ways. While there were obviously many factors at work, already in 1915 Marx Scheler argued that the war was a consequence of the impact of nihilism on the relations among states because they no longer had any shared values[3]. Looking back on this period, Karl Löwith remarked in a similar vein that nihilism as «the disavowal of existing civilization was the only the real belief of all the truly educated people at the beginning of the twentieth century», and that «consequently nihilism [was] not the result of

[3] Cfr. Scheler (1915), pp. 322-23.

the Great War but, on the contrary, its cause»[4]. The nihilistic despair of war poets such as Wilfred Owen is obvious, but the knockout blow that the war delivered to the idea of progress and morality is perhaps even more apparent in the post-war period. From Kafka (*The Trial*, 1925) and Céline (*Journey to the End of Night*, 1932) to Hemingway (*The Sun Also Rises*, 1926; *A Clean Well Lighted Place*, 1926), T.S. Eliot (*The Wasteland*, 1922), and F. Scott Fitzgerald (*The Great Gatsby*, 1925), the meaninglessness, aimlessness, and brokenness of existence repeatedly came to the center of attention. This was also apparent in the world of art where the Dadaists rejected the bourgeois logic they saw as having led to the war and turned to chaos and irrationality in an effort to undermine existing norms. For this "lost generation" nihilism not only led to despair but to a despair from which there was no escape and which led to apathy and listlessness. In his *Hollow Men* (1925) Eliot declared that the world ends not with a bang but with a whimper, giving voice to a broadly shared opinion of the time. Fitzgerald's Gatsby and his generation are imagined in the end to reach out their arms a bit farther in search of the elusive future but to be borne by a powerful countervailing current into the past. The cataclysmic sense of the time was perhaps best encapsulated in Ostwald Spengler's *Decline of the West* that saw the advent of nihilism as a sign of the impending collapse of western civilization. Georges-André Malraux similarly declared that with the disappearance of the Christian values and the advent of nihilism, humanity reverted to animality and brutality. This is graphically depicted in *Man's Fate* (1933), in the character of Chen Ta Erh who is asked to assassinate one of the oppressors but who quickly becomes addicted to killing in a manner similar to that of Conrad's Kurtz. The physician and poet Gottfried Benn summed up this outlook, declaring that nihilism had become a permanent part of the human condition and that the best humans could do was to conceal this fact with myth, dreams, visions, and everything else that belongs to the

[4] Löwith (1966), p. 10.

unconscious self[5].

This growing nihilism and the expectation of the imminent collapse of civilization that produced cultural pessimism and impotence among so many thinkers and writers, gave rise in others to apocalyptic expectations. This was reflected in a number of ways, including the growth of a pan-European spiritualist movement, and the rise of local holy men and women, but also in the development of a new idea of philosophy and theology. Many like W.B. Yeats were deeply concerned that some "dread beast" was «slouching toward Bethlehem to be born», but this possibility for a surprising number of people was as much an object of hope and longing as of dread and revulsion. Franz Rosenzweig, for example, was convinced by Nietzsche's critique or morality and religion to reject Hegelian idealism in favor of a more existential philosophy in his *Star of Redemption* (written in the Macedonian trenches and published in 1921). Similarly, Karl Barth, drawing in part on Luther, sought to show in his *Letter on Romans* (1922) that only through the experience of nihilism could one become genuinely religious. Karl Jaspers followed a similar path, convinced that nihilism was the inevitable outcome of European thought but believing that it opened a new door for a return to a genuine Christianity, based on a Kierkegaardian leap of faith. Even those on the political left were deeply moved by the war and the impact of nihilism. In his *Spirit of Utopia* (1918), Ernst Bloch, for example, abandoned his orthodox socialism for an eschatological vision of the end of history based on an acceptance of the death of God and nihilism. Echoing Nietzsche, he suggested that it was precisely because God had disappeared from the world that there was hope for the future.

The most important thinker who confronted the question of nihilism and the possibilities it opened up during this period was Martin Heidegger. From his claim in *Being and Time* that we have lost our way because we have forgotten the question of Being, to his assertion in his inaugural lecture, *What is*

[5] Cfr. Thielicke (1961), p. 39.

Metaphysics, that Being is nothing and that it is only through the experience of death that this nothingness can be understood as the advent of Being, he was deeply concerned with the issue of nihilism. This concern became explicit in his consideration of nihilism in his Nietzsche lectures of the 1930s[6].

Heidegger asserted that the current age was characterized by the forgetfulness of the question of Being (*Sein*), that is, the forgetfulness of the distinction of Being and beings. He was convinced that as a result we had lost touch with what makes us human or what he called *Dasein* (literally "Being-there") and had become merely interchangeable parts in the technological machine of Western civilization. His goal was to raise anew the question of Being. In order to do this, however, he first had to show how Being had been forgotten and concealed in the history of Western metaphysics. This concealment and forgetfulness of Being for Heidegger is nihilism. Nihilism in his view was thus not merely a phenomenon of late nineteenth and early twentieth century European thought but had characterized the history of the West since the time of Socrates and Plato. Heidegger accepted Spengler's Nietzschean notion that we stand at the end of Western civilization, and was convinced that the West ended with the nihilistic domination of global technology. Moreover, like Barth and Jaspers, he believed that this end concealed the possibility of a new beginning and a renewal of a connection to Being that had been lost for the past 2500 years. Nihilism for him was thus the basis for a new revelation of Being. It obliterated the distinction between Being and beings and therefore undermined metaphysics which was based in this distinction. This meant that Being was literally nothing, but in his view it was precisely this post-metaphysical recognition of the nothingness of Being that was the first step in the recognition of the radical alterity of Being. Being thereby again became a question. In this way the world-midnight of technological nihilism opens up the possibility for an encounter with Being itself unavailable to human beings since the time of

[6] Cfr. Heidegger (1961).

the pre-Socratics. The explicit nihilism that appears in Nietzsche's thought is thus a kairetic moment of transition: «the region of completed nihilism constitutes the limit between two world ages»[7].

Heidegger thus viewed nihilism within an apocalyptic framework. In the 1930s he believed that nihilism opened up the door for the transformation of the European world by revealing the possibility for a new kind of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) that would make it possible for human beings to harness (rather than serve) global technology. He believed the National Socialist movement represented such a possibility and attached himself to the Nazi Party. In the aftermath of World War II he concluded that National Socialism had proven to be merely another form of technological nihilism, and that humanity's only hope lay in a poetic encounter with the nihilistic essence of technology. While he saw an apocalyptic transformation of human life as more distant, he was still convinced that it would arrive, arguing that when the danger is near the saving power is not distant. He thus concluded famously that we cannot overcome nihilism on our own, and that consequently, "only a God can save us"[8].

3.Nihilism and Politics during the Interwar Years

Such apocalyptic nihilism is particularly dangerous when combined with politics. This was earlier the case with Russian nihilism which produced a revolutionary movement that aimed at the complete destruction of the existing ideas and institutions of order but without a positive plan for what would replace them. This policy was clearly disruptive but ultimately ineffective when pitted against the overwhelming power of an authoritarian state. This destructive impulse, however, had a greater impact in Lenin's hands when combined with a Marxist vision of a socialist future. The apocalyptic hopes engendered by Russian nihilism and planted in Bolshevism broke through the soil with

[7] Ivi, p. 26-27.
[8] Cfr. Heidegger (1976).

the collapse of the Russian political order in Russia at the end of WW I, before coming to full flower in Stalin's Terror.

This combination of nihilism and political ideology played a similarly disastrous role in the rise of a political nihilism in Weimar Germany in the 1920s. One of the most famous proponents of such nihilism was Ernst Jünger who glorified the nihilistic heroism of life at the front in WW I in his *Storm of Steel* (1920). In his *The Worker* (1932) he argued further that in the planetary civilization which was coming into being and in which everything (as Nietzsche had realized) was permitted, there was only room for the warrior and the worker, and the society that was best able to mobilize these energies would emerge triumphant. His nihilistic advocacy of war and total mobilization played a crucial role in Fascist and Nazi thinking, although he himself refused to enter the party.

This anti-liberal nihilism had a broad impact in Germany. Carl Schmitt's rejection of a moral foundation of the political in favor of a sheer decisionism was only one form of this nihilism, which was echoed in a whole generation of young German nihilists who sought to live heroically without illusions in a world in which God was dead. Harshly critical of the Weimar Republic, they also had little idea of what to put in its place. They hated the liberal regime that they believed had betrayed them in WW I and hated what they saw as the leveling and anti-heroic consequences of communism. The alternative that many Germans chose, National Socialism, was in large part a vulgar form of this German nihilism. Alfred Rosenberg and Alfred Bäumler, for example, drew heavily on Nietzsche and his notion of nihilism in laying out an ideological foundation for National Socialism[9].

The success of National Socialism also depended in many respect upon the inability of German thought and particularly liberal Christianity to deal with the problem of nihilism. Hitler himself noted in *Mein Kampf* that one of the problems with Weimar Germany was its inability to deal with religious

[9] Cfr. Ascheim (1992), p. 157.

nihilism. What he offered in its place was a new political religion, rooted in belief in his leadership and in the notions of Aryan supremacy and antisemitism at the party's ideological core[10].

While Nazism typically portrayed itself as a solution to nihilism, many argued from the beginning that it was itself a form of nihilism. This was especially the case among those who saw the supposed goals of Nazism as merely rhetorical camouflage for an opportunistic dynamism that was willing to use any means to attain and increase its power. This position was famously defended by Hermann Raushning in his *The Revolution of Nihilism* (1937-38). In his view the Nazis's purposeless dynamism aimed to destroy German society in order to create a machine for further conquest and expansion that ultimately aimed at nothing other than mere power. At the time, many in the West thought that his portrayal of National Socialism was too diabolic and fiendish, but in retrospect his account seems in many ways to have been prescient. With the outbreak of the war and the growing awareness of the character of the Nazi regime, this reading became more widespread in books such as Alfred Weber's *Farewell to European History, or the Conquest of Nihilism* (1948).

4. Nihilism After World War II: Existentialism, Critical Theory and Postmodernism

The experience of WW II, the Holocaust, and the dawn of the Atomic Age led to a further transformation in the meaning of nihilism. This was particularly evident among those French existentialist thinkers whose work was deeply indebted to Nietzsche and Heidegger. The most notable and influential of these were certainly Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.

Sartre's concern with nihilism antedated the war. In his novel *Nausea* (1938) he explored the abyss between concepts and reality. In his view mere existence is meaningless and attains meaning only because human beings give it meaning through a

[10] Cfr. Voegelin (2000), pp. 19-74.

sheer act of freedom, exercising a godlike power. In contrast to Nietzsche, however, he believed that the absence of eternal values and the possession of absolute freedom does not mean that "everything is permitted". Indeed to avoid acting in bad faith we must always act freely as if all of humanity acted in us. To be human it is crucial to be not merely in oneself but also for oneself, a self-conscious being. But one can be for oneself only in and with others. Freedom for Sartre is thus invariably tragic because it always involves clashing with the wills of others. Or as Sartre's character Joseph Garcin famously declares in his 1941 play *No Exit*, "Hell is other people".

For Camus, who first probed the question of nihilism in *Caligula* (1938), nihilism is the condition of absurdity in which humans find themselves. It is exemplified in his view in the myth of Sisyphus. Following Nietzsche, he assumed that none of our historical narratives could support eternal values. He interpreted Nietzsche to be using nihilism to revolt against the world's indifference to man. In contrast to Nietzsche, however, he did not think that man can become a god but believed he must accept his own finitude and absurdity. Camus laid out his own heroic nihilism in *The Rebel* (1951) which seeks a reason not to commit suicide or murder, that is, a way to avoid what Nietzsche called passive and active nihilism. Camus was convinced that real revolt against the world's indifference had to be on behalf of human solidarity, which he portrayed in *The Stranger* (1942). In this respect both Nazism and the Soviet experiment were manifest failures in his opinion. In seeking a path between the murderous nihilism of Hitler and nihilistic Bolshevism of Stalin on one hand and the banality of bourgeois nihilism on the other, he concluded finally that the true significance of nihilism is negative. It clears the ground and acts to immunize man against all metaphysical and theological mystifications.

Another group of writers who explored this same nihilistic terrain were those playwrights grouped together as the Theater of the Absurd. They were drawn from many different European

countries but located mainly in France and included Eugene Ionescu, Jean Genêt, Arthur Adamov, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, Friedrich Dürrenmatt and others. They sought to portray reality in its starkest and most unadorned moments. Their characters live in utterly mundane worlds, often subject to stultifying routines, confronted with a tragicomic existence that seems completely meaningless. In the end they are forced to face life in the recognition of the emptiness of death. Nihilism here is a tragic reality without a solution which can be borne, at least in part, by the comedy of its own absurdity.

Critical theorists within the Frankfurt School also faced the problem of nihilism. Living in exile in the USA, the Germans Theodore Adorno and (Heidegger's student) Max Horkheimer had used Nietzsche's notion of nihilism to help them formulate their account of the self-destruction of reason in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). For Adorno (and for his fellow refugee and Heidegger's student Herbert Marcuse) Nietzsche's negative account of modernity exemplified the task of critical theory, demonstrating the essentially repressive character of culture[11]. Like Löwith, Adorno was convinced that nihilism was an implicit aspect of modern thought. He felt, however, that the efforts of Nietzsche and Heidegger to overcome nihilism had only made it worse. For Adorno the Holocaust was the epitome of nihilism. Nihilism as he saw it was thus not connected with anything other than negation and annihilation.

Others generally in the Heideggerian School displayed a somewhat greater concern for the religious meaning of nihilism. Keiji Nishitani, a Japanese student of Heidegger, claimed that the determinative feature of contemporary philosophy was its failure to find a solution to nihilism. Christianity, he believed, could not do so because it provided no space in which the wills of God and man could meet, and existentialists such as Sartre who believed we could create meaning for ourselves were misguided. Drawing on Nietzsche, Stirner, and Dostoevsky, Nishitani argued that the need for overcoming nihilism has

[11] Cfr. Ascheim (1992), pp. 185-86.

formed a "spirit" that can «open up a horizon for important contacts with Buddhism»[12]. Nihilism for Nishitani "transcends time and space". Wherever nihilism appears, man experiences a loss of meaning. Overcoming nihilism for him is thus an *affirmative* process that may require suffering, but it is a suffering enables us to be creative and self-conscious. Nishitani thus encourages Japanese thinkers to return to Japan's primordial roots to find meaning and «to overcome our inner void»[13].

Gianni Vattimo, an Italian student of the Heideggerians Karl Löwith and Hans-Georg Gadamer, aims to understand «the definition of what a postmodern philosophy might be» by affirming the place of Nietzsche's "European nihilism" in the postmodern world[14]. Nihilism for him is the form of thinking that emerges after the death of God. Vattimo like Nietzsche and Heidegger understands nihilism as a "will to power" or a "will to will". This has a number of consequences. History, for example, makes no sense because it has no end, progress just leads to more progress[15]. However, in his view this "accomplished nihilism" calls us to «a fictionalized experience of reality which is also our only possibility for freedom»[16]. Vattimo believes that in the technological age (with its mass media and global communication) we must utilize *hermeneutics* as a way of understanding the unfolding of Being as fiction. Postmodern philosophy in his view thus emerges when we are able to experience the world not as something new but as a reinterpretation, that is, in terms of the new fictions that are on one hand errors but on the other the revelations of Being[17].

Vattimo in many respects builds his conception of nihilism on the ground of the thought of Heidegger and his students but

[12] Nishitani (1990), p. XXXIV.
[13] Ivi, p. 178.
[14] Cfr. Vattimo (1988).
[15] Cfr. ivi, pp. XVIII-XIX.
[16] Ivi, p. 29.
[17] Cfr. ivi, p. 126.

he was also deeply influenced by French post-structuralists and postmodernists. For postmodernist thinkers such as George Bataille, Pierre Klossowski, Maurice Blanchot, Gilles Deleuze, and Michel Foucault nihilism was an accomplished fact. They were all deeply influenced by Nietzsche's notion of nihilism but interpreted it in a new way. They accepted the fundamental epistemological claim of nihilism that there is no absolute truth or meaning and no ultimate goal to human life, and recognized that there cannot be universal moral standards. In contrast to both Nietzsche and the existentialists, however, they did not see this as tragic or as catastrophic. They argued instead that the only justification for any moral system is that it is mine. Derrida, Rorty, and others thus came to believe that nihilism frees individuals and organizations from the dead hand of the past and opens up the possibility of many new ways of being, including those that were marginal or prohibited under the old morality. Jean-François Lyotard and others argue that rather than relying on an overarching historical story, each group can legitimate its own truths by telling its own story, or meta-narrative.

They thus did not reject Nietzsche's account of nihilism but radically reinterpreted it. For them there is no God, no being, no rank order of values. All meaning is culturally constructed, but this is not a source of regret or despair, rather an opportunity for unlimited, ironic play. In interpreting Nietzsche they argued that when he refers to active, or destructive nihilism, he is speaking metaphorically and thus not about real destruction but about linguistic destruction and reinterpretation, an activity that they believe is essential to liberation.

Some critics argue that postmodernism trivializes nihilism because postmodernists simply assume that nihilism is a permanent and unremarkable feature of human existence[18]. Carr, for example, believes that Rorty represents merely an "aesthetic" response to nihilism, a tendency to "yawn" and react with a light-hearted playfulness [19] . Rorty in his view accepts

[18] Cfr. Rose (1984); Carr (1992).
[19] Cfr. Carr (1992), pp. 8 and 86.

Nietzsche's prognosis of nihilism but understands it not as a disaster but as the basis for a new philosophical innocence. «Rorty is a carefree, happy-go-lucky nihilist who is not about to let himself be bothered any more by the old concerns of philosophy»[20]. For him what is important is not to understand things philosophically but to learn how to cope. He sees nihilism turning us away from theoretical to a practical engagement with the world. Nihilism thus ends not in tragedy and despair but in ironic play and neo-pragmatism.

In a similar if somewhat more serious vein Jacques Derrida sees himself continuing and radicalizing the Heideggerian effort to deconstruct Western metaphysics as a preparation for overcoming nihilism, but in contrast to Heidegger he does not believe that any God will save us. We are left instead in the philosophic void of nihilism. If no texts or actions have meaning, all that remains is meaningless play of words which refer only to other words, never to something real, «in an endless drift, deferral, or dissemination of undecidable meaning (*différance*), words without end, an abysmal labyrinth in which we are forever condemned to wander aimlessly about»[21]. In the face of nihilism philosophy for Derrida thus becomes a form of literature, mere *fiction*.

To be fair, not all postmodernists adopt such an ironic sensibility. Indeed, even for Derrida the theological elements remain important. In this respect, there is also a serious theological strain in postmodernism. Jean-Luc Nancy, for example, sees nihilism not merely as the inverse of myth but as the recognition that even though mythical beliefs are unsustainable we continue to long for them[22]. Nancy thus skirts a boundary that appeared in Nietzsche's thought which always verges on the proclamation of something like a new revelation and points us toward a convergence of postmodernism and contemporary theology.

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[20] Madison (2001), p.15.
[21] Ivi, p. 22.
[22] Cfr. Shershow (2003), p. 258.

5. Nihilism and Theology

Postmodernism's encounter with nihilism in many ways points back to religion and theology, and to a side of Nietzsche's thought that typically remains concealed. Nietzsche is probably best known for his proclamation that God is dead and he is thus typically taken to be an atheist, but for Nietzsche, the death of the Christian God is always connected with the possibility of the epiphany of a new God, which he most often refers to under the name of Dionysus, and the reestablishment of a "tragic" religiosity. Within the consideration of nihilism, the question of the nature and place of God, even an absent or dead God, is never far beneath the surface. As we noted above, for thinkers such as Heidegger, Rosenzweig, and Barth this theological element often comes to the surface in such astonishingly important ways, and similar claims could easily be made for Eliot, Schmitt, and Nishitani. This religious connection remained evident in more recent of Vattimo and others as well.

Nihilism also had a profound impact on more traditional theologians. Thomas Altizer, for example, proclaimed in the 1960s the truth of Nietzsche's insight that God is dead, but interpreted it in Hegelian fashion to show that with the crucifixion of Christ, God's spirit was released into world. The immanence of God in his view was the answer to the nihilistic problematic Nietzsche saw rooted in the duality of good and evil. Altizer argued that evil is not separation from God but absence of will. The immanence of God thus means that the world can no longer be rejected in favor of a beyond thus obviating Nietzsche's charge[23].

John Milbank, the center of the Radical Orthodoxy movement, also places great weight on the problem of nihilism which he believes is the direct antithesis to Christianity[24]. Milbank regards Christianity as an unfounded myth, that is, as

[23] Cfr. Manschreck (1976), p. 94.
[24] Cfr. Hayman (2000), p. 430.

fictional[25]. For Milbank, however, nihilism is also only a story. When nihilism becomes fictional it is both accomplished and overcome, and it thereby loses its privileged status[26]. It is thus possible in his view to imagine a reconciliation between a fictional nihilism and a fictional theology[27].

6.Conclusion

Nietzsche proclaimed a few years before lapsing into insanity that, «Nihilism stands at the door», and asked, «Whence comes this uncanniest of all guests?»[28]. In the 125 years since then, nihilism has entered into many areas of modern life, from art, literature, and philosophy to ethics, politics, and religion. And yet, while we can easily recognize this fact, coming to terms with nihilism and its meaning for us is extraordinarily difficult. A clue to the source of this difficulty lies in Nietzsche's characterization of the experience of nihilism as the experience of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*), indeed of the uncanniest (*das Unheimlichste*). The uncanny refers to that which exceeds the ordinary, which is not a substance or quality or anything that fits into our established categories, and which consequently cannot be named or defined. That does not mean we do not try to give it a name, to tame or to control it by establishing it within what we see as the order of the world, in order to render it less terrifying. But this only seems to confine it. Indeed, nihilism is itself a negative name that points to nothing and that thus implicitly declares the advent of the no-thing. In trying to name the uncanny we thus face the same difficulty as trying to name

[25] Cfr. ivi, p. 432.
[26] Cfr. ivi, p. 441.
[27] Cfr. ivi, p. 431. Nihilism has also been a topic of concern as a strictly metaphysical question in analytic philosophy, turning around the question whether there could have been nothing, and thus whether there could be a universe (*e.g.* of sets or universals) without concrete objects (Baldwin, 1996; Rodriguez-Pereyra, 1997; Lowe, 2002; Cameron, 2006; Coggins, 2003). This concern is, however, tangential to the larger concern with the aesthetic, moral, and political implications of nihilism.
[28] Nietzsche (1967), p. 123.

God, or what Kant called the sublime, or Heidegger originally referred to as Being, and what postmodern thinkers typically refer to as *différance* or alterity. The word itself in German, *das Unheimliche*, literally means the "unhomish", and could equally be translated as the unsettling or the alienating. As the uncanny, nihilism thus appears within our world as an alien other, that upsets and shatters the ordinary, and induces the recognition of a tragic incomprehensibility at the heart of actuality. Nihilism in this sense inscribes a vast question marking over all existence. In the face of nihilism we are thus alternately terrified, bored, inspired, and awestruck.

Giving this experience the name nihilism, has made it somewhat more tractable but it has not by any means allowed us to master the phenomenon. In fact, the name points only to an abyss or to a void that we seek to avoid or cover over and in any case not to fall into or be swallowed up by. In this light, it is perhaps not surprising that we have failed to achieve any agreement on the exact meaning of nihilism or what can be done to overcome or ameliorate it. Some like Conrad's Kurtz will peer into the heart of this darkness and become entranced with the horror they find there. Others like Heidegger see the proximity of this immeasurable danger as an indication that salvation is also close at hand. Some like Camus see it as the source of irremediable suffering while others like Rorty imagine it is a license for experimental play. What we cannot expect is a definitive determination of the meaning and nature of nihilism. At best one must be content with examining the continuing series of attempts to name the experience of nihilism, for nihilism is above all a name for an experience, the experience that exceeds all our categories and all of our understanding.

Aristotle tells us that philosophy begins with wonder in the face of aporia, amazement and perplexity in the face of dead ends or contradictions, first in the face of those that are near at hand and then with those ever more distant. Thinking in this sense is fundamentally rooted in primordial questions which have no final answer, questions which are a manifestation of the

uncanny. We cover this over with words and explanations that allow us to overlook and forget this fundamental incomprehensibility, but the questions themselves do not go away but gradually eat away at all our answers and ultimately emerge again to strike us full force in all their mystery. Within the Biblical tradition, we are told that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. This names another aspect of the uncanny or at least points toward the unsettling, the fear evoking, and at times the terrifying response it engenders. The experience of nihilism is the consequence of the recognition that all the categories of reason and science that we have constructed since the time of the Greeks are inadequate to account for existence. It thus reveals the tragic heart of the world. This essay has provided a rough sketch of the development of the concept of nihilism since Nietzsche. This genealogy does not define nihilism but it may perhaps provide us with some insight into the uncanny question that lies at its heart.

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Abstract
This essay provides an account of nihilism after Nietzsche, beginning with pre-WW I nihilism, which was associated with decadence and gave rise to an investigation of the primitive, the mythical, and the unconscious. Then I turn to an examination of the nihilistic despair and apocalypticism of the period from the beginning of WW I to the end of WW II. This leads to an examination of nihilism and absurdity in the 1950s and 1960s, before concluding with an examination of nihilism and irony in critical theory and postmodernism. I argue throughout that Nietzsche remains decisive for the later understanding of nihilism and conclude that all attempts to come to terms with nihilism are necessarily inadequate but bring us closer to understanding the uncanny question at its heart.

Keywords: Nietzsche, Nihilism, Wilde, Conrad, Sartre