

Postmodern Nihilism: Theory and Literature

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It is with considerable shame that I must therefore admit that this thesis is dedicated to none of these. It is, and can only ever be, ‘to no-one in particular’.

Abstract

This thesis examines the relationship between nihilism and postmodernism in relation to the sublime, and is divided into two parts: theory and literature. Beginning with histories of nihilism and the sublime, the Enlightenment is constructed as a conflict between the two. Rather than promote a simple binarism, however, nihilism is constructed as a temporally-displaced form of sublimity that is merely labelled as nihilism because of the dominant ideologies at the time. Postmodernism, as a product of the Enlightenment, is therefore implicitly related to *both* nihilism *and* the sublime, despite the fact that it is often characterised as *either* nihilistic *or* sublime. Whereas prior forms of nihilism are ‘modernist’ because they seek to codify reality, postmodernism creates a new formulation of nihilism – ‘postmodern nihilism’ – that is itself sublime. This is explored in relation to a broad survey of postmodern literature through a series of interconnected themes. These themes – apocalypse, the absurd, absence, and space – arise from the debates presented in the theoretical chapters of this thesis, and demonstrate the ways in which nihilism and the sublime interact within postmodern literature. Because of the theoretical and literary debates presented within it, this thesis concludes that it cannot be a thesis at all.

‘The Preface’

This thesis can be summarised as an exploration of nihilism in relation to postmodern theory and literature. This is not to say that it is a survey of all occurrences of nihilism within postmodern literature, however, because there is more at stake than merely observing what others have already observed: what is at stake, the ‘ante’ that is put forward, is, broadly speaking, the future of nihilism. There is much more to nihilism than merely ‘rage against Being’ or ‘the destruction of Being’, and so the future of nihilism is not simply a ‘nihilism of the future’, a perception of the future in which all is bleak, but the means by which we admit Gianni Vattimo’s call for philosophy today ‘to recognise nihilism is our (only) chance’.¹ Although the argument presented here is different from Vattimo’s, the fact nevertheless remains that nihilism – the philosophy of absence and nothingness – must remain paradoxically ‘present’ within philosophy and culture. Its eradication would hail a new fundamentalism, a new Enlightenment perhaps even more damaging than the first. Nihilism *is* our (only) chance.

The approach to nihilism that this thesis proposes is a new formulation of nihilism based upon postmodern theory – a ‘postmodern’ nihilism. Although many critics argue that postmodernism is nihilistic, others argue that postmodernism is a response to an earlier ‘modernist’ nihilism. These two arguments are incommensurable and so this thesis does not hope to resolve them, but to instead move them into the arena of the sublime. Although a number of studies link postmodernism and nihilism, and others link postmodernism and the

¹ David Levin, *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 5; Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture*, trans. by Jon R. Snyder (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 23.

sublime, none have yet explicitly linked nihilism and the sublime within postmodernism despite the fact that the Enlightenment origins of nihilism and the sublime suggest a link between the two. Nihilism, assumed by most to be a negative signifier, an adjective to describe that which is bleak and hopeless, and the sublime, frequently interpreted as the positive signifier, rich in potential for ethics, are not as distinct as might be assumed. It would be facile and obvious to conclude that both nihilism and the sublime mean different things to different people. Rather, we must establish why these divisions occur, and so this thesis is as much an excavation of the cultural etymology of these signifiers as it is about how they function in relation to postmodern literature.

The first half of this thesis is concerned with the theoretical aspects of nihilism, postmodernism, and the sublime. Histories of nihilism (chapter one) and the sublime (chapter two) will be discussed and compared, and will then be used in the construction of postmodernism. Nihilism and the sublime exist as parallel movements throughout the history of modernity. Postmodernism, as the culmination of that movement, therefore incorporates both nihilism and the sublime. This association of postmodernism with nihilism does not mean that postmodernism is (nihilistically) negative because postmodernism is *both* sublime (we should talk about the ‘sublime postmodern, not the ‘postmodern sublime’) *and* nihilistic. Perceived in this way, postmodernism merely inverts the oppositional hierarchy of nihilism and the sublime seen during the Enlightenment period. Thus, nihilism and the sublime form the divisions of the final two theoretical chapters, although rather than histories, these are accounts of how the two concepts interact within contemporary theory and postmodernism. This study is separated into chapters on the ‘sublime postmodern’ (chapter three) and ‘postmodern nihilism’ (chapter four), thereby defining the differences between nihilism and the sublime within the postmodern. This construction suggests a

‘postmodern’ formulation of nihilism, distinct from earlier forms, that is itself sublime, which is also called ‘reflexive nihilism’ or ‘deconstructive nihilism’.

The second half of the thesis concentrates on how ‘postmodern nihilism’ appears in postmodern literature. It is intended as a broad survey that, rather than emphasising a particular author or set of authors (although this does occur in places), covers a broad cross-section of postmodern writing in order to demonstrate a number of concepts and their development within the literature of postmodernism. Although the ‘literature of postmodernism’ is a problematic label, this thesis formulates it quite broadly. It includes not only texts that exhibit a postmodern aesthetic, but also those that are produced under the economic and social ‘conditions’ of postmodernity. Thus, whilst authors such as Paul Auster and Thomas Pynchon are considered postmodern because of the forms their novels take – demonstrating intertextuality, ontological instability, and openness, for example – we may also consider authors such as Bret Easton Ellis and Denis Johnson postmodern in the sense that they are writing both about and within a condition of postmodernity.

For the purposes of this thesis, postmodernism will be argued to be both *historic*, suggesting the interpretations of critics such as Fredric Jameson and David Harvey, and *aesthetic*, suggesting the interpretation of Jean-François Lyotard. In fact, the theoretical nature of the first part of the thesis will show that postmodernism is a ‘historicised aesthetic’. For this reason, the second half of this thesis does not follow the loose chronological structure of the first half, but suggests a number of themes that emerge from the conflation of nihilism and the sublime: apocalypse (chapter five), the absurd (chapter six), absence (chapter seven), and ‘space’ (chapter eight). All literary texts cited in these chapters include years of publication with their first mention in the body of the thesis (note that if published in a foreign language first, it is this year, and not the year of the first English translation, that

is used). These are included because although the literary chapters do not follow a chronological structure this does not necessarily preclude a shift in emphasis as the concept of postmodernism develops. Thus, such a measure will enable the reader to gauge whether such a shift occurs.

A disclaimer is also required at this point: no translations in this thesis are mine. The history of both nihilism and the sublime are often entwined with the predominantly French, German, and Russian languages and cultures that produced them. Where possible, non-English phrases are explained through different translations of texts and translators of certain phrases are indicated for the sake of the clarity. Thus, some of the readings presented in this thesis will already have been filtered through a translator before the analysis presented here. This is an intractable problem, but one that does not invalidate the readings presented. Any different translations indicated within the thesis are therefore the result of contrary translations and any mistakes noted by the reader are purely my own.

Parts of Chapter Eight, “‘Neverland’: The Space of Nihilism’, appear in the essay “‘This is not for you’: Nihilism and the House that Jacques Built’, in *Nihilism: Theory and Praxis*, ed. by Alan Pratt (forthcoming from SUNY Press).

Ex Nihilo: Constructing Nihilism

What does ‘nihilism’ mean? This question, posed by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Will to Power*, is difficult to answer simply. For Nietzsche, nihilism meant that ‘*the highest values devalue themselves*. The aim is lacking; “why?” finds no answer’.¹ This seems to be the case in the postmodern age, where morals are without justification, faith is replaced with cynicism, and God is all too evidently missing, presumed dead. Nihilism did not originate with Nietzsche, however, and neither did it end with him. Before Nietzsche, philosophies of nihilism are evident from classical Greece to Enlightenment Europe; since Nietzsche, and especially since the Holocaust, nihilism is no longer a marginalized philosophy, but one that is vital to understanding the history of modernity. How we understand nihilism at the dawn of a new millennium – a millennium that is incidentally only possible within a Christian framework – depends upon how its history is constructed in relation to modernity.

If nihilism is implicit in the history of modernity, then constructing a history of nihilism is a monumental task: it is, in effect, a historiographical exercise incorporating the entirety of Western thought. There are two sides to every (hi)story, however, and nihilism is no different in this respect: one side argues that nihilism and the history of modernity are fundamentally entwined, the other argues that nihilism is only part of the history of modernity, only one thread among many. The former argument is seen nowhere more clearly than in Martin Heidegger’s philosophical project on the history of metaphysics:

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), §2 (p. 9).

Nihilism is a historical movement, and not just any view or doctrine advocated by someone or other. [...] Nihilism, thought in its essence, is [...] the fundamental movement of the history of the West. It shows such great profundity that its unfolding can have nothing but world catastrophes as its consequence. Nihilism is the world-historical movement of the peoples of the earth who have been drawn into the power realm of the modern age.²

Heidegger argues that nihilism is implicit in thought itself and, as such, is irrevocably a history of modernity. It is a ‘world-historical movement’, ‘the fundamental movement of the history of the West’ in which every action taken is part of the development of nihilism. In contrast, Stanley Rosen argues that ‘Although the danger of nihilism is a permanent human possibility, the actual pervasive influence of nihilism today is due to a series of specific philosophical decisions in the past’.³ Here, rather than being an implicit part of the history of modernity, nihilism is merely one aspect of it, and it is one that could have been avoided. Although nihilism is a ‘permanent human possibility’, it is not Heidegger’s ‘thought in its essence’ but instead ‘thought in its potential’.

Such arguments illustrate the ‘problem’ of nihilism, revealing not only that nihilism is a problem in relation to culture, but also that defining the term is difficult. Similar to all signifiers, ‘nihilism’ has a number of associations that cannot be inferred directly from its etymology. This is because an ideological stance often calls that which is opposed to it ‘nihilistic’ since it seeks to make that ideology ‘nothing’. Thus, the term ‘nihilism’ refers historically to a perception of something that exists in opposition to particular ideologies, rather than being an ideology of the *nihil* [nothingness] as such. Although the word ‘nihilism’ is concerned with negation, because anything ideologically negative *is* negation, it is a *qualified*

² Martin Heidegger, ‘The Word of Nietzsche: “God is Dead”’, in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. by William Lovitt (New York: Garland Press, 1978), pp. 53-112 (pp. 62-63).

³ Stanley Rosen, *Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay* (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2000), p. xiv.

negation based upon the assumption that the opposing ideology is true. This creates a number of historically different ‘nihilisms’ that each attacks a specific ideology. Over the course of time, nihilism comes to stand for *any* negation that attacks dominant ideological practices, becoming a generic category that is an *unqualified* negation.

This quality of ‘negation’ within nihilism means that its usage is culturally specific. In general terms, nihilism originates *ex nihilo* [from nothingness]: nihilism is the ‘system, principle, or ideological movement’ (*OED*) of the *nihil*. For this reason, one could just as easily begin with the development of zero in mathematics as with the repeated occurrence of ‘nothing’ in the plays of Shakespeare when tracing the origins of nihilism.⁴ There are also formulations of nihilism that are not called ‘nihilism’ and have little to do with ‘nothing’: Greek scepticism, for example, exhibits many of the characteristics of nihilism without being directly affiliated with ‘nothing’ because of the Greek antipathy towards the void.⁵ There is therefore more to nihilism than simply ‘nothing’ unless one counts even this absence of nothing as an instance of nihilism. That is, if ‘nihilism’ delineates a specific cultural use of nothing, and Greek philosophy had no use for ‘nothing’ (saying nothing about ‘nothing’), then Greek nihilism implies a rejection of Greek philosophy: scepticism. Even in the absence of nothing, scepticism is an early form of nihilism because it negates existing ideologies. Nihilism is therefore a cultural appropriation of the concept of nothing: the value, however negative, that a particular culture makes of nothingness. Whereas ‘nothing’

⁴ On the history of zero, see, for example, John D. Barrow, *The Book of Nothing* (London: Vintage, 2001); Robert Kaplan, *The Nothing That Is: A Natural History of Zero* (London: Penguin, 2000); or Charles Seife, *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea* (London: Souvenir Press, 2000). On Shakespeare and ‘nothing’, see, for example, Duncan Fraser, ‘Cordelia’s Nothing’, *Cambridge Quarterly*, 8 (1978-79), 1-10. Aside from these, the problem of nothingness is dealt with in a number of other ways. See, for example, Marcia L. Colish, ‘Carolingian Debates over *Nihil* and *Tenebrae*: A Study in Theological Method’, *Speculum*, 59:4 (1984), 757-95, or Wulf Koepke, ‘Nothing but the Dark Side of Ourselves? The Devil and Aesthetic Nihilism’, in *The Fantastic Other*, ed. by Brett Cooke, George E. Slusser, and Jaume Marti-Olivella (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), pp. 143-63.

⁵ See Barrow, pp. 58-60; Kaplan, pp. 14-18; and Seife, pp. 34-35.

denotes an abstract concept, ‘nihilism’ signifies ‘nothing’ within an ideological framework. In this way, nihilism is interpellated nothingness, nothingness that has always already been hailed by a particular ideology.

The cultural specificity of nihilism means that the question posed by Nietzsche – ‘what does “nihilism” mean?’ – cannot be answered with a simple statement. Although the first instance of the term ‘nihilism’ in 1799 indicates its emergence as a distinct concept, a number of generic formulations exist prior to this. The ‘meaning’ of nihilism is therefore dependent upon both a spatial and a temporal understanding of any particular formulation. When constructing a history of nihilism, we are not merely talking about *when* a particular formulation arose, but also *where*. There are therefore two standard methods of historicising nihilism, one *chronological*, and the other *genealogical*.

Chronological histories of nihilism demonstrate how the concept of nihilism has progressed over time, charting its development through a linear chronology. Texts such as Michael Gillespie’s *Nihilism Before Nietzsche* fall into this category because they determine what nihilism means in relation to a series of historical episodes. Such a method, as Gillespie himself writes, is ‘retelling the story of modernity’, and therefore falls into the trap of being a *grand récit*, as John Zammito argues.⁶ Whilst nihilism is an important factor in European history, as both Rosen and Heidegger suggest, nihilism is not equivalent to modernity but the *response* to the various processes of modernity. This criticism means that a chronological history of nihilism is an act of hermeneutic violence towards the history of modernity, ‘forcing’ a reading of both nihilism and modernity.

⁶ Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. xxiii; John Zammito, ‘Nihilism before Nietzsche’, *Journal of Modern History*, 68:4 (1996), 976-78.

A genealogical history, in contrast, focuses upon a discursive network of different formulations of nihilism. Texts such as Karen Carr's *The Banalization of Nihilism* and Johan Goudbloom's *Nihilism and Culture* are genealogical because they construct nihilism within a spatial framework, proposing a 'family tree' of nihilism in which a number of different formulations are explored. A genealogical structure therefore demonstrates that a number of formulations of nihilism do not fit into the linear pattern of a chronological history. Such formulations are not independent of history but embedded within it, emerging and submerging in the manner of a genetic inheritance. Thus, genealogical histories explore the *genus* [family] of nihilism in relation to a number of 'generic' constructions.

Both chronological and genealogical histories of nihilism reveal that the manner in which a history of nihilism is constructed alters our perception of its development. This chapter outlines the ways in which nihilism is constructed historically to demonstrate the extent to which the concept of 'nothing' is reified within certain cultural systems, and hence write a history of nihilism. However, this must be reflexive, with an understanding that this construction is itself part of the history. Understanding genealogical characteristics of generic 'nihilisms' allows chronological developments of the term to be gauged, albeit contingently, and so this chapter uses both genealogical and chronological histories to show the development of the term. Despite the fact that the chronology presented later in this chapter is engaged in hermeneutic violence, the genealogy that precedes it demonstrates why such a structure is in place, and locates the history itself within a discursive network of other histories.

Generating Nihilism

There are a number of ways of formulating nihilism throughout history and such formulations distinguish between different ideological applications of nothingness. Here, rather than applying to historically specific ideologies, the *genera* of nihilism apply to different philosophies. Thus, the formulation of nihilism that deals with ethics – ethical nihilism – is solely concerned with the relevance of nihilism to the study of ethics. Whilst the study of ethics itself develops diachronically, ‘ethical nihilism’ is the negation of all philosophies of ethics, no matter where they are located (temporally or spatially). Ethical nihilism is therefore disconnected from other areas of philosophical enterprise (such as epistemology or ontology) as well as historical formulations of ethics: it is, in a certain sense, independent of history, existing only within the discursive network of nihilism. Such ‘generic’ divisions of nihilism are in many ways arbitrary, for the structure of the ‘family tree’ of nihilism is always an imposed structure. The simplest of these divisions are those such as Karl Jasper’s distinction between nihilism as the ‘denial of values’ or the ‘denial of being’, and Nietzsche’s ‘passive’ and ‘active’ nihilism.⁷ One of the most complex ‘family trees’ of nihilism is suggested by Carr, who defines five varieties of generic nihilism: epistemological, alethiological (Carr’s spelling), metaphysical or ontological, ethical or moral, and existential or axiological.

The first two categories – epistemological and alethiological nihilism – are commonly held to be synonymous. ‘Epistemological nihilism’ states that knowledge is impossible, whereas ‘alethiological nihilism’ states that any formulation of truth is impossible. In most

⁷ See Johan Goudbloom, *Nihilism and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 43. The original source is Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* (Berlin: [Springer], 1954), pp. 285-303. Nietzsche’s distinction between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ is discussed later in this chapter, although Goudbloom himself identifies eight varieties of Nietzschean nihilism, divided into four binary oppositions (see p. 10).

cases, if one denies the possibility of knowledge, one is also denying the possibility of truth, and vice versa, although Carr disagrees with this. She argues:

If knowledge is taken to be justified true belief, then alethiological nihilism entails epistemological nihilism; without truth, there can be no knowledge. If, however, knowledge is understood differently (for example, as the beliefs deemed legitimate by a community of discourse), then one can be nihilistic about truth but not about knowledge [...] Note that one can hold a theory of truth – an account of what it would take for a proposition to be considered true – and believe that it is impossible to satisfy the necessary conditions (i.e., be an alethiological nihilist).⁸

This distinction allows the possibility of denying knowledge *and/or* truth. One can believe in knowledge whilst denying truth, or believe truth whilst denying knowledge, although this is inaccurate inasmuch as Carr's 'community of discourse', like Stanley Fish's 'interpretative communities', suggests a 'justified true belief' in that both knowledge and truth are justified consensually (and is therefore both aletheological and epistemological).⁹ Such distinctions do entail an examination of what 'truth' means, however, for Carr's definition depends upon whether it is 'Truth' (an absolute Truth, applicable over a totality of different knowledge bases) or 'truth' (one in any number of possible truths, often mutually exclusive, for example, in the case of postmodern pluralism).

When these terms are synonymous, as is usually the case, 'epistemological nihilism' (as it is then called) entails a complete absence of the possibility of 'knowledge' and 'truth'. We cannot know what is true, and what is not. One of the earliest examples of epistemological

⁸ Karen L. Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth-Century Responses to Meaninglessness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 17.

⁹ See Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretative Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980). Carr's distinction between 'alethiological' as 'the theory of the nature of truth' and 'epistemological' as 'the theory of the test for truth' is from Timothy Jackson, 'The Theory and Practice of Discomfort: Richard Rorty and Pragmatism', *Thomist*, 51 (1987), 270-98. See Carr, p. 149, n. 23.

nihilism is scepticism, and most notably Pyrrhic scepticism, which argued that the intellect cannot reason the truth and that empirical data (from the senses) cannot uncover knowledge:

Neither our perceptions nor our judgments teach us to know truth or untruth. Therefore we must not trust either our sense or our reason, but must remain without opinion, unmoved, inclining neither to one side nor the other. Whatever the matter in question may be, we shall say that one can neither deny nor confirm it, or that one must simultaneously confirm and deny it.¹⁰

The two internal questions of knowledge and truth continually defer to one another because to ‘know’ we must have access to the ‘truth’, and yet to have access to the ‘truth’ we must ‘know’ what it is. Once one of these terms is secured, the other falls into line, yet to the most ardent nihilists neither can be resolved and therefore there is no truth and no knowledge.

Carr’s third formulation, ‘metaphysical or ontological nihilism’, signifies ‘the denial of an (independently existing) world’.¹¹ This is simply a statement of solipsism – ‘without me the world does not exist’ – although it does have wider reaching implications when it is perceived as the belief that nothing exists at all; that is, nothing exists, there is no reality against which to measure this, and no-one to measure it anyway. It is based upon the belief that reality is illusory, an arbitrary set of rules that has no meaning. The view that ‘nothing is real’ can lead to either a magnificent furore of being the centre of the universe – without its perception by the observer, the world does not exist – or to complete impotence in the face of an overwhelming nullity, depending upon the extent to which this nihilistic formulation is pursued.

¹⁰ Quoted in Goudsblom, p. 114. The original source is Aristocles on Pyrrho, quoted by Victor Brochard, *Les sceptiques Grecs: Ouvrage Couronné par l’Académie Des Sciences Morales et Politiques* (Paris: [Vrin], 1932), p. 54. Goudsblom’s translation.

¹¹ Carr, p. 17.

‘Ethical or moral nihilism’, Carr’s fourth formulation, claims that there are no moral absolutes and that no system of ethics has any claim to validity. All judgements are invalid because they are without ultimate justification. By far the most important aspect of ethical nihilism is its seeming tendency towards egocentricity and hedonism, in that, if no absolute morals exist, one can act exactly as one pleases (the ‘magnificent furore’ noted in the previous paragraph). This ‘ethic’ of nihilism – ‘if nothing is true, then everything is justified’ – is ultimately the product of false assumptions. It presumes that if nothing is true then everything must be justified, although if nothing is true then *nothing* is justified: ‘One need only to glance at the multiplicity of options [...] to arrive at the conclusion that nothing is true; if the next move is to proclaim proudly, “so everything is justified”, one has a new principle for action’.¹² This ‘new principle for action’, whether egoism or violence, has no grounding in nihilism and is the result of the individual finding meaning where there is none: it is an individual response to the problem of nihilism, not the logical result of it.

Carr’s final formulation of nihilism is, in fact, not necessarily ‘nihilism’ at all. She incorporates ‘existential or axiological nihilism’ into nihilism, defining a form of existentialism as an aspect of nihilism. This is, for Carr, ‘the feeling of emptiness and pointlessness that follows from the judgment, “Life has no meaning”’.¹³ Carr argues that this feeling of ennui is the most common variety of nihilism, and that whilst the previous formulations do not necessarily lead to existential despair, they often result in this formulation being realised. This means that it is a ‘secondary’ formulation, in that it is ‘derived from alethiological, epistemological, or ethical nihilism’ and is thus ‘axiological’ (derived from axioms).¹⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre is one such proponent of existentialism, although it

¹² Goudsblom, p. 137.

¹³ Carr, p. 18.

¹⁴ Carr, p. 20.

is doubtful that he would agree that it is a formulation of nihilism. For example, Sartre argues in *Being and Nothingness* that nothingness is the point from which being begins to exist ‘for-itself’:

The being of consciousness qua consciousness is to exist at a *distance from itself* as a presence to itself, and this empty distance which being carries in its being is Nothingness. Thus in order for a *self* to exist, it is necessary that the unity of this being include into its own nothingness as the nihilation of identity. [...] The for-itself is the being which determines itself to exist inasmuch as it can not coincide with itself.¹⁵

This does not imply that nothingness leads to existential despair, but that nothingness is an integral part of consciousness, that consciousness only exists by making a gap (a ‘nihilation’) between itself and its perception of itself. As such, existentialism does not intrinsically lead to despair and is not nihilism in any sense but the fact that it is an ‘interpellated nothingness’. Although existentialism is a form of nihilism in that it ‘makes use’ of nothingness, it is not an axiologically ‘derived’ form.

There are other formulations of nihilism other than those defined by Carr, most notably those of ‘theological nihilism’, ‘political nihilism’, and ‘semantic nihilism’, all of which closely correspond to the chronological development of nihilism. Theological nihilism is the denial of God, and is one of the cornerstones of modern-day nihilism since Nietzsche’s famous proclamation about the ‘Death of God’ and the rise of atheism during the Enlightenment.¹⁶ It denies the possibility of God and of any other transcendent being (and often any transcendent form *of* being), although there are numerous peculiarities to this

¹⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 78.

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufman (New York: Random House, 1974), III, §108 (p. 181).

belief. Many proponents of this, to distinguish it from atheism, believe in the absence that has replaced God since His ‘demise’: not an absence of belief but a belief in absence. Likewise, political nihilism is itself divided into numerous beliefs. Although ‘political nihilism’ is concerned with the philosophical rejection of any valid means of government, it is often connected with terrorism, anarchism, and political extremism, such as the nihilism of the Russian Nihilists.¹⁷ Political nihilism, like theological nihilism, is a *portmanteau* category comprised of any philosophical formulation that rejects either politics or divinity, respectively, without regard to the extent of actual ‘nihilistic’ philosophy contained within it. Political nihilism is therefore not the absence of politics but the politics of absence (anarchism). The final generic category of nihilism, semantic nihilism, argues that words and concepts are divided, that communication is an illusion, and that language does not function. Semantic nihilism functions ‘before’ epistemological or aletheological nihilism, because it entails the rejection of all consensual theories of knowledge or truth because these concepts rely upon communication in order to function. Furthermore, semantic nihilism rejects any formulation of knowledge because language mediates consciousness; thus, whereas epistemological nihilism functions only in relation to knowledge, semantic nihilism encompasses both semantics and epistemology, and proposes a reason for the impossibility of knowledge. This corresponds to the accusations of nihilism levelled at philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida, where the (perceived) destruction of language is equivalent to semantic nihilism.

These categories reveal some of the common differences perceived within nihilism, although they are all similar in that each of these distinctions is concerned with the ‘truth’.

¹⁷ For more on the comparison of ‘political nihilism’ as terrorism, see Donald A. Crosby, *The Spectre of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

Thus, ethical nihilism argues that there is no truth in any system of ethics, and epistemological nihilism argues that there is no truth in any system of knowledge. This use of truth creates problems for nihilism because nihilism dismisses the truth of any system but its own. Marxism can criticise the ‘truth’ of Christianity because it does not rely on absolute truth to do this but on the laws of production and economy. In contrast, nihilism addresses other philosophies at the level of truth, forcing itself into a contradiction: how can it be true if there is no truth? Nihilism can only exist to negate another ideology, and can only be true ‘generically’, not ‘generally’. This reliance upon another ideology means that the meaning of nihilism shifts historically, as once-dominant ideologies become replaced by others, which nihilism then attacks instead, its own meaning shifting as a result. It is clear, therefore, that nihilism is also diachronic, and this requires a shift in emphasis from genealogy to chronology.

Humanist Nihilism (1799-1851)

The rise of nihilism as a cultural force historically begins with the rise of scientific atheism in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries and, as such, is deeply rooted in European experience. Although it can be traced back further, to such philosophers as René Descartes and Immanuel Kant, it is the appropriation of these figures and their philosophies that led to the use of the term.¹⁸ Johann Fichte, a German idealist in the Kantian tradition, extended Kant’s philosophy to the point that it became monstrous egoism. Fichtean idealism, for

¹⁸ Gillespie argues that nihilism begins with Descartes, devoting an entire chapter of *Nihilism Before Nietzsche* to Descartes’ work whereas Nietzsche identifies Nicolaus Copernicus as the source of the shift ‘away from the centre towards X’ (*The Will to Power*, §1 (p. 8)). Simon Critchley, however, argues in *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997) that, ‘the proper name for this breakdown [of religious orthodoxy] is *modernity*’ (p. 2). It would be wrong to argue that modernity is, in itself, nihilistic – it is, as page 8 of this thesis states, because nihilism is ‘the *response* to the various processes of modernity’. Kant does have a part to play, however, in the following chapter on the history of the sublime.

fellow philosopher Friedrich Jacobi, ‘reduces everything to the activity of the I, and thus reduces God to a mere creation of the human imagination [...] The good, the beautiful, and the holy become merely hollow names’.¹⁹ In 1799, because of a letter from Jacobi, Fichte has the dubious distinction of being the first ‘nihilist’.²⁰ Jacobi was someone who, whilst praising Fichte’s reason, despaired that this would inevitably lead to atheism: ‘Truly, my dear Fichte, it should not grieve me, if you, or whoever it might be, want to call *chimerism* what I oppose to idealism, which I reproach as *nihilism*’.²¹ This marks the emergence of the term ‘nihilism’ in the general debates over religion, rationality, and science. During the heated intellectual debates of these ideas, the term for those who were pro-rationality, and anti-deist, was ‘nihilist’. These early nihilists signified a break in the union of science and religion, with their ever-increasing interest in Man, not God, and in reason, not faith. This, in the modern sense of the term, is ‘theological nihilism’.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there is a codification of the term ‘nihilist’ for those who are atheistic. For example, it is at this point that the term ‘nihilism’ appears in a dictionary by Louis-Sébastien Mercier, published in 1801. In this dictionary, we see the term, *rienniste*: ‘NIHILIST OR NOTHINGIST. One who believes in nothing, who interests

¹⁹ Gillespie, p. 66. Gillespie is paraphrasing Jacobi’s argument, the original source of which is Friedrich Jacobi, *Werke*, 3 vols (Leipzig: Fleischer, 1812-25; rpt. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968), III, p. 36.

²⁰ There were other uses of the terms ‘nihilism’ and ‘nihilist’ before this point. Otto Pöggeler notes that Jacob Obereit, Daniel Jenisch, and Friedrich Schlegel all used the term in the period 1787-1797 (in ‘Hegel und die Anfaenge der Nihilismus-Diskussion’, in *Der Nihilismus als Phaenomen der Geistgeschichte in der wissenschaftlichen Diskussion unseres Jabrundert*, ed. by Dieter Arendt (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974), pp. 307-49, and in “Nihilist” und “Nihilismus”, *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*, 19 (1975), 197-210). Most modern histories of nihilism include Pöggeler’s scholarship: see, for example, Gillespie, pp. 275-76, n. 5; Goudsblom, p. 4, n. 4; and Carr, p. 13. Gillespie further traces the first use of the term back to F. L. Goetzius’ *De nonismo et nihilismo in theologia* (1733), but says that this work, ‘was relatively unknown and apparently played no role in the later reappearance and development of the concept’ (p. 65).

²¹ Quoted in Gillespie, p. 65; and Goudsblom, p. 4. The original source is Jacobi, III, p. 44. Carr further notes that for Jacobi, nihilism ‘functioned as an argument *reductio ad absurdum*’, where, ‘if one could show that nihilism was the consequence of a particular position, then that position was obviously invalid’ (p. 14).

themselves in nothing'.²² The emergence of nihilism from the decline of the Church is the result of the growing momentum of Enlightenment rationality, implicitly connecting Enlightenment humanism to nihilism. Religious bodies condemned this increasing desire for human knowledge (at the expense of faith) as 'nihilistic' because it disputed certain undoubted assumptions, and replaced God with man. Logic dictated that faith was incompatible with the world and so the Church began to distance itself from this growing movement of reason.

If science and 'rational' philosophy thus became opposed to religion, in the eyes of Franz von Baader this dichotomy could lead only to 'obscurantist pietism' or 'scientific nihilism' because one must either be a deist with no recourse to reason or a rationalist with no moral guidance.²³ It is for this reason that nihilism became synonymous with atheism and rationality, but as Donoso Cortès' argued, this was merely the prelude:

Thus all socialist doctrines, or, to be more exact, all rationalist doctrines, necessarily lead to nihilism: and nothing is more natural and logical than that those who separate themselves from God should end in nothing, since beyond God there is nothing... The negation of all authority is far from being the last of all possible negations; it is simply a preliminary negation which future nihilists will consign to their prolegomena.²⁴

The movement of the meaning of 'nihilism' between von Baader's essay of 1824 and Cortès' essay of 1851 is indicative of the change from nihilism as 'merely' atheism to that which includes 'all rationalist doctrines'. This negation of deist authority, for Cortès, was only the

²² Quoted in Goudsblom, p. 3; and Gillespie, p. 276, n. 5. The original source is Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Neologie: ou Vocabulaire des mots nouveaux à renouveler, ou pris dans des acceptions nouvelles*, 2 vols, (Paris: Moussard, 1801), II, p. 143.

²³ Quoted in Goudsblom, p. 4. The original source is Franz von Baader, 'Über Katholizismus und Protestantismus', in *Sämtliche Werke*, 16 vols (Leipzig: [Meiner], 1851), I, pp. 71-80. Goudsblom's translation.

²⁴ Quoted in Goudsblom, p. 5. The original source is Donoso Cortès, Marquis de Valdemagas, *Essai sur le Catholicisme, le Liberalisme et le Socialisme* (Liège: [n.pub.], 1851), [n.pag.]. Goudsblom's translation and ellipses.

beginning, and we see that, historically, this was indeed the case. This is the origin of the Russian Nihilists, where nihilism moves towards encompassing a quasi-anarchistic, quasi-Communist, meaning.

The movement between atheism and anarchism is seen nowhere more clearly than in the philosophy of Max Stirner (the pseudonym of Johann Kaspar Schmidt), a philosopher who had been following the Hegelian movement in Germany. ‘Left’ Hegelianism, with which Stirner was initially associated, was the quasi-Marxist belief that the progress of history was through society not government (which was ‘right’ Hegelianism). For example, R. W. K. Paterson argues that Ludwig Feuerbach declared that “‘God’ is nothing but the name for the idealized essence of man himself, and that a perfected human species is the true subject of the attribute “divine””.²⁵ Stirner, however, abandoned his leftist roots in favour of something more personal, as seen in the title of his philosophical text, *The Ego and Its Own*. He believed that both government *and* society held back the individual’s growth and proposed that only the individual matters (egoism). Furthermore, there was no moral framework to this philosophy because such a framework would also restrict the individual (ethical nihilism). It is for these reasons that Stirner is known as a ‘nihilistic egoist’, and the conflation of these two terms is implied throughout *The Ego and Its Own* in phrases such as ‘I have made nothing my cause!’.²⁶ For Stirner, the self defines everything, even truth:

The truth is dead, a letter, a word, a material which I can use up. All truth by itself is dead, a corpse: it is alive only in the same way my lungs are alive, namely in the measure

²⁵ R. W. K. Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist: Max Stirner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the University of Hull, 1971), p. 29. For a brief history of the reception of Hegelianism in Germany, see Paterson, pp. 22-35.

²⁶ Quoted in Goudsblom, p. 162. The original source is Max Stirner, *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* (Leipzig: [Wigand], 1845), p. 491. Goudsblom’s translation. Carr notes, however, that Stirner never actually labels himself a nihilist (p. 148, n. 10).

of my own vitality. Truths are material like vegetables and weeds; as to whether vegetable or weed, the decision lies in me.²⁷

This idea of the truth being dead, or somehow centred upon the human, means that truth is true only in relation to the individual, and not outside that relation. Stirner's radical perspective is therefore the link between the decline in religious orthodoxy (nihilism-as-atheism) and the rise of political extremism (nihilism-as-anarchism), a movement from the origins of nihilism towards Russian Nihilism.

Anti-Authoritarian Nihilism (1852-1871)

The meaning of nihilism moved from religion to politics in the mid-nineteenth century, and shifted from central Europe to Russia. It became associated with politics because of the upheaval of the inherited social order that occurred in Russia during the 1850s and 1860s. There were thus two meanings of nihilism at this point: atheism (atheism or theological nihilism) and anarchism (Russian or political nihilism). These signify two moments in terms of the development of nihilism: the *passive individual* and the *active individual*. *Passive individual* nihilism, associated with nihilism-as-atheism, is concerned with an alternative proposition to the dominant ideology. This is *passive* because it is not inherently destructive, and *individual* because it is not initially an ideological movement. The formulation of Russian Nihilism is an *active individual* nihilism where individuals seek to subvert a dominant ideology. It was still fiercely individualistic (*individual*) but was no longer passive, but a force of destruction (*active*). Russian Nihilism was conspicuously concerned with relating nihilism to real-world scenarios – a movement from theory to action, for which 'nihilism' was their term for revolutionary

²⁷ Quoted in Paterson, p. 289. The original source is Stirner, pp. 414-15. Paterson's translation.

fervour. Despite this, to attribute any one cause or any one meaning to Russian Nihilism is impossible, as there are two differing approaches towards nihilism in this period. These two persuasions of Russian Nihilism are roughly characterised by their respective political instigators and organs: Nikolai Chernyshevsky and the *Sovremennik* [Contemporary], and Dmitrii Pisarev and the *Russkoe Slovo* [Russian Word].²⁸ Chernyshevsky's brand of populism is called nihilism only by default as it was Pisarev who actually adopted the term, after reading Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1862) and empathising with the character of Bazarov.²⁹ Chernyshevsky and the *Sovremennik* group actively opposed the term, arguing that it bore no relation to their agenda.

The character of Bazarov is one of the earliest depictions of a 'nihilist' within Russian literature and is a compound of the figures of Chernyshevsky and Pisarev.³⁰ Although other authors dealt with nihilism, especially Fyodor Dostoyevsky in *Demons* (1873) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), such texts continued the debate, rather than starting it.³¹ Within *Fathers and Sons*, the first appearance of the term 'nihilism' is met with some confusion by Nikolai Petrovich, an aged member of the 'old guard': 'A nihilist [...] That's from the Latin *nihil*, *nothing*, so far as I can judge. Therefore, the word denotes a man who ... who doesn't

²⁸ The translations are from Irina Papeno, *Chernyshevsky and the Age of Realism: A Study in the Semiotics of Behaviour* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

²⁹ See Franco Venturi, *Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth Century Russia*, trans. by Francis Haskell (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964), p. 326; and Peter C. Pozefsky, 'Smoke as "Strange and Sinister Commentary on *Fathers and Sons*": Dostoevskii, Pisarev and Turgenev on Nihilists and Their Representations', *Russian Review*, 54:4 (1995), 571-86 (p. 572). Pozefsky also notes that the relationship between Turgenev and Pisarev was strained following the appropriation of the character of Bazarov (see Pozefsky, pp. 572, 578-81).

³⁰ Although Turgenev is frequently credited with the first literary mention of nihilism, it appeared earlier in Karl Immermann's *Die Epigonen. Familienroman in Neun Büchern* (1823-1835). This is before both the philosophical and novelistic inception that are traditionally realised, although Goudsblom notes that this sense of the term implies 'good-for-nothing', and that the first literary use of 'nihilism', as 'the destruction of all traditional values' is in Karl Gutzkow's *Die Nihilisten* (1853). See Goudsblom, pp. 6-7.

³¹ *Bey* [*Demons*] is often translated as *The Possessed*, although Richard Pevear notes in his translation that 'The implications of the word are almost right, but it points in the wrong direction [...The] Russian title *Bey* refers not to possessed but to possessors' – Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons: A Novel in Three Parts*, trans. by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Vintage, 1994), p. xiii. This corresponds to the shift from 'passive' nihilism to 'active' nihilism.

recognize anything?'.³² This is interpreted by Pavel, Nikolai's brother, to represent one 'who doesn't respect anything'.³³ The response from Arkady, Bazarov's friend and Nikolai's son, clarifies the issue thus: 'A nihilist is a man who doesn't acknowledge any authorities, who doesn't accept a single principle on faith, no matter how much that principle may be surrounded with respect'.³⁴ Turgenev's depiction of nihilism fuelled an important debate during this period because it highlighted the problem of how social change was to be achieved. For example, M. A. Antonovich, a critic for the *Sovremennik*, called Bazarov 'a venomous creature who poisons everything he touches', whereas Pisarev, obviously espousing the *Russkoe Slovo* line, wrote that 'If Bazarovism is an illness, it is the illness of our times'.³⁵

The distinction between the two branches of 'Russian Nihilism' is an important one because Chernyshevsky's aim was the Westernisation of Russia, following Feuerbach and Fichte in a process of anthropocentricism. Hegelianism had been debated in Germany for many years and had resulted in what was once a state-authorised philosophy becoming increasingly revolutionary due to its atheistic leanings. Elena Dryzhakova summarises Chernyshevsky's position, arguing that he rejected 'religious and moral assumptions as outdated and useless for the solution of social problems' and found that Feuerbach, and others like him, 'provided a totally new foundation for the resolution of moral questions'.³⁶

³² Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, trans. by Richard Freeborn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 26.

³³ Turgenev, p. 26.

³⁴ Turgenev, p. 27.

³⁵ Quoted in Pozefsky, pp. 571-72. The original sources are M. A. Antonovich, 'Asmodei nashego vremeni', *Sovremennik*, 3 (1861), [n.pag.], rpt. in *Literaturno-kriticheskie stat'i* (Moscow: [n.pub.], 1961), [n.pag.] (p. 53); and Dmitrii Pisarev, 'Bazarov', *Russkoe Slovo*, 3 (1862), [n.pag.], rpt. in *Literaturnaia kritika v trekh tomakh* (Leningrad: [n.pub.], 1981), I, p. 236. Pozefsky's translation.

³⁶ Elena Dryzhakova, 'Dostoevsky, Chernyshevsky, and the Rejection of Nihilism', *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, n.s. 13 (1980), 58-79 (p. 59).

As the character of Bazarov says, ‘the Germans are our teachers’ and, in this respect, ‘The Russian debate over nihilism is [...] an extension of the German controversy’.³⁷

Chernyshevsky’s appropriation of the German Left Hegelianism moved the debate from predominantly theological arguments towards the notion of a ‘unity of nature’. This ‘unity’ meant that man, as the central figure in both nature and his own life, derived the greatest good from ‘rational egoism’ and because of this, ‘what is good is what is advantageous’.³⁸ This introduced the idea of ‘utility’ into the rhetoric of the Russian Nihilists:

In contradistinction to the development of German Left Hegelianism, which accepted the *necessity* of the dialectical development of history and consequently a severe limitation on the freedom and power of human will, Russian Nihilism attributed to man an almost absolute power to transform his social existence. The theoretical basis for this nihilist view was the belief that history was determined not by immutable laws but by free individuals.³⁹

Dryzhakova notes that ‘utility was declared to be the sole criterion of good, and goodness and utility were deemed to be simply the product of “reason”’.⁴⁰ Chernyshevsky, sufficiently imbued with the idea of a Hegelian spiritual progression of history, even if twisted towards a more egoistic line of thought, worked patiently for reform. However, the Westernising aims of Chernyshevsky, having little to do with an institutionalised program of violence against the state, were to become corrupted. In 1862, the year that Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* was first published, both the *Sovremennik* and the *Russkoe Slovo* were suppressed, and Chernyshevsky himself arrested, following the St Petersburg fires and the publication of the notorious essay, ‘Young Russia’.

³⁷ Turgenev, p. 30; Gillespie, p. 138.

³⁸ Quoted in Dryzhakova, p. 59. The original source is N. G. Chernyshevsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 15-i tomakh* (Moscow: [n.pub.], 1939-53), pp. 288-89. Dryzhakova’s translation.

³⁹ Gillespie, p. 141.

⁴⁰ Dryzhakova, p. 59.

‘Young Russia’, the cause of so much upheaval both to liberals and the establishment, was written by a young student called Petre Zaichnevsky and contained material that was not only politically sensitive but also promoted violence towards the ruling classes:

Soon, soon will come the day when we shall unfurl the great banner of the future, the red banner, and with the loud cry of ‘Long live the social and democratic republic of Russia’ we shall move on the Winter Palace to liquidate its occupants.⁴¹

Chernyshevsky’s liberal agenda was increasingly undermined at this point by other, more radical voices in Russian culture. Westernisation gave way to the increasingly violent socialist agenda of the *Russkoe Slovo* group, who felt that the attitudes espoused by the writers of the *Sovremennik* were not radical enough. Franco Venturi characterises this aspect of Russian Nihilism as ‘positivist’ and ‘extreme’, although Gillespie disputes Venturi’s use of the term ‘populist’.⁴² Venturi argues that Pisarev’s group reduced everything solely to what might be termed a ‘materialist realism’, saying that ‘Aesthetic “realism” became in their hands a violent repudiation of art; “utilitarianism” an exaltation of the exact sciences, the only “useful” kind of human activity; and “enlightenment” a glorification of the educated classes’.⁴³ This, then, is the real moment of Russian Nihilism, the point at which it arguably ceases to be populist and allies itself with the intelligentsia. The *Russkoe Slovo* group was purely interested in science – the science of economics, of liberation, and of strength: ‘They refused to believe either in ruling classes or even in a myth of the “people” and the “peasants”’. ‘The

⁴¹ Quoted in Dryzhakova, p. 63. The original source for ‘Young Russia’ is B. P. Koz’min, *Politicheskie protsessy 60-*kh* godov*, i (Moscow-Petrograd: [n.pub.], 1923), pp. 259-69. Dryzhakova’s translation.

⁴² Venturi argues that Chernyshevsky and the other authors of the *Sovremennik* are not ‘nihilists’, and prefers to see Pisarev and the *Russkoe Slovo* as nihilists who are themselves part of the populist movement – its ‘*enfants terribles*’ (pp. 325-26). However, Gillespie partially disagrees with this idea, especially because it seems to him that Venturi still wishes to call both groups ‘populist’ (pp. 284-85, n. 17).

⁴³ Venturi, p. 325.

emancipation of the person” (i.e. the formation of independent characters, “who think critically”) was more important than social emancipation’.⁴⁴

The politics of the *Russkoe Slovo* group dominated interpretations of ‘nihilism’ at this point, despite the fact that the *Sovremennik* group pointed out, quite accurately, that nihilism, ‘is a word devoid of meaning, less suitable than any other for describing the younger generation, in which could be found every other kind of “ism” but certainly not nihilism’.⁴⁵ These radicals were interested in negation, not nothingness, because aimed to negate the dominant ideology of Russia at that time, as Hermann Goldschmidt argued: ‘Russian Nihilism was politically liberal, philosophically materialistic and spiritually atheist’.⁴⁶ Russian Nihilism was social Darwinism: if an institution was strong enough to survive, it would; if it was not, it would fall. These aspects of Russian Nihilism were therefore nihilistic only inasmuch as they relied upon certain aspects of Western philosophy that were *themselves* only tangentially nihilistic. To call the Russian Nihilists nihilistic is only accurate in historical terms – they are the ‘Russian Nihilists’ – because their aims and intentions had little to do with nothingness. However, nihilism became, thanks to Chernyshevsky, the idea of a ‘new man’ who could free himself from history and, thanks to Pisarev, predicated upon notions of terrorism, of elitist egoism, and of anarchism.

⁴⁴ Venturi, p. 327.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Venturi, p. 326. The original source is Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin, ‘Nasha obshchestvennaya zhizn’, in *Sovremennik*, 3 (1864), [n.pag.]. Venturi’s translation.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Goudsblom, p. 9. The original source is Hermann L. Goldschmidt, *Der Nihilismus im Licht einer kritischen Philosophie* ([Zürich]: Thynggen-Schaffhausen, 1941), p. 12. Goudsblom’s translation.

Anti-Humanist Nihilism (1872-1888)

Around the same time that the Russian Nihilists were in decline, Nietzsche, writing about a ‘transvaluation of all values’ in *The Will to Power*, brought nihilism back into mainstream Western culture.⁴⁷ Instead of showing nihilism to be an emergent ideology, as both nihilism-as-atheism and nihilism-as-anarchism indicate, Nietzsche argued that nihilism was something that pervaded all European values. Nietzsche (ironically) called Christianity nihilistic because Christianity was so involved with telling the truth that when it was ‘proved’ untrue it left a vacuum in its wake. He also argued that Christianity was nihilistic because, in its struggle for the ineffable transcendent, it rejected the natural world. He wrote of ‘the damage all human institutions sustain if a divine and transcendent higher sphere is postulated’: ‘natural’ comes to mean ‘contemptible’ until ‘with relentless logic’ one arrives ‘at the absolute demand to deny nature’.⁴⁸ This definition of nihilism is a *passive social* nihilism because it is a cultural phenomenon, not to be relegated to subversive individuals, but to the entirety of (Christian) European civilisation (*social*). Furthermore, Christianity was initially a ‘good’ proposition, not aimed at the destruction of other values (*passive*). Nietzsche rewrote nihilism to demonstrate that it ‘should be regarded not as the personal whim of inveterate negativists, but as the product of an irrefutable logic inherent in European culture’, therefore corresponding to Heidegger’s historiography of nihilism, rather than Rosen’s, because it argues that nihilism is always present.⁴⁹

Nietzsche’s statements concerning nihilism come from one of three sources: truth, value, and morals. In fact, within Nietzsche’s philosophy these three concepts are closely

⁴⁷ Nietzsche’s legacy is well known in the twentieth century, and can be traced through Heidegger, Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze, amongst many others. However, in strict relation to nihilism two views predominate: the first that Nietzsche *invented* modern nihilism (critics such as Goudsblom) and the second that Nietzsche *misunderstood* nihilism (critics such as Gillespie).

⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §245 (p. 141).

⁴⁹ Goudsblom, p. 140.

entwined. It is after the Preface to *The Will to Power* that we see Nietzsche's answer to the question 'What does "nihilism" mean?': '*That the highest values devalue themselves*. The aim is lacking; "why?" finds no answer'.⁵⁰ Nihilism came about as the result of a belief being rejected because of its own criteria – it loses its 'value', it has no 'moral' weight or objective 'truth'. Nietzsche perceived nihilism to be primarily a sickness – ambiguous in that it weakens, but that it can also make strong when it is overcome – and thus nihilism became something that was to be overcome. Passive nihilism is a sickness, 'a weary nihilism that no longer attacks [...] a sign of weakness', whereas active nihilism 'reaches its maximum of relative strength as a violent force of destruction'.⁵¹ Active nihilism can be characterised in some ways by the tenets of Russian Nihilism; passive nihilism, according to Nietzsche, was nowhere more prevalent than in the Christian monism that had dominated Europe for almost two millennia.

The fact that Nietzsche labelled Christianity as nihilism is ironic, given the origins of the term within atheism. To Nietzsche, nihilism arose because of Christianity's insistence upon a hierarchy of morals, an absolute – God – from which to derive all standards. Christianity 'granted man an absolute value, as opposed to his smallness and accidental occurrence in the flux of becoming and passing away', and in so doing 'conceded to the world, in spite of suffering and evil, the character of perfection'.⁵² In fact, Christianity 'posited that man had a *knowledge* of absolute values and thus *adequate knowledge* precisely

⁵⁰ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §2 (p. 9).

⁵¹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §23 (p. 18). Note that this definition of 'active' and 'passive' nihilism is similar to that presented within this chapter.

⁵² Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §4 (pp. 9-10).

regarding what is most important'.⁵³ However, Christian morality was *originally* created to stop man from falling into the nihilistic abyss: 'It prevented man from despising himself as man, from taking sides against life, from despairing of knowledge: it was a *means of preservation*. In sum, morality was the great *antidote* against practical and theoretical *nihilism*'.⁵⁴ The use of Christian morality to stem nihilism creates nihilism as a human baseline, a chasm which is forever threatening when one sees that truth is merely contingent upon human need, when the smallness of man is compared to the expanse of the universe. Nietzsche felt that Christianity was no longer required as a 'cure' to nihilism, or at least, 'this *first* nihilism'. By the nineteenth century, 'our Europe is no longer that uncertain, capricious, absurd' and now Christianity is no longer required: "'God" is far too extreme a hypothesis'.⁵⁵ Christianity was a means to an end and thus justified by its initial conditions; those initial conditions, however, no longer applied, and therefore Christianity, by devaluating its own values and turning into atheism, became the epitome of nihilism.

In 1887 (the time when Nietzsche was writing this part of *The Will to Power*), Christianity was in decline. Nietzsche charted the fall of Christianity back to Christian morality itself, saying: 'Among the forces that morality cultivated was *truthfulness*: this eventually turned itself against morality, discovered its teleology, its partial perspective – and now the recognition of this inveterate mendaciousness that one despairs of shedding becomes a stimulant'.⁵⁶ The rise of the Enlightenment ideals of reason, of humanity 'for itself', finally destroyed its own creator – the Christian moral of 'truthfulness'. Like Oedipus

⁵³ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §4 (p. 10). §4, §5, §114, and §55 were originally together in Nietzsche's notebooks, but as the numbers demonstrate, have been divided in successive compilations of *The Will to Power*. Richard Schacht, in *Nietzsche: Selections* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), recompiles these in their original format under the heading, 'European Nihilism'. See Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 9, n. 3, and Schacht, p. 267, n. 3.

⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §4 (p. 10).

⁵⁵ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §114 (p. 70).

⁵⁶ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §5 (p. 10). Schacht inserts the line 'To nihilism' after this quotation, something that is notably absent from the Kaufman/Hollingdale text (p. 267).

killing his father, this desire for truth had begun to turn on Christianity, and found it lacking. Just as the rise of nihilism is at the heart of the Age of Reason, so too is the fall of Christianity. Christianity, which secured humanity against nihilism, eventually exacerbated its rise. Thus, those earlier commentators such as Jacobi and Cortès, who found that rationality and religion were staunchly opposed, were indeed correct, but sought to lay the blame on individuals such as Fichte, not upon Christianity itself.

From whence does nihilism arise then? In Nietzsche's view, it is quite literally the void left by Christianity's absence. The reaction to the distrust of Christian morality, the lack of faith in faith itself, leads not to a position of compromise, but to an extreme reaction:

Thus the belief of the absolute immorality of nature, in aim- and meaninglessness, is the psychologically necessary affect, once the belief in God and an essentially moral order becomes untenable. Nihilism appears at this point, not that the displeasure at existence has become greater than before but because one has come to mistrust any 'meaning' in suffering, indeed, in existence.⁵⁷

The gap left in morality harks back to Nietzsche's idea that the 'untenability of one interpretation of the world [...] awakens the suspicion that *all* interpretations of the world are false'.⁵⁸ This reaction is further explained when Nietzsche argues that, 'One interpretation has collapsed; but because it was considered *the* interpretation, it now seems as if there were no meaning at all in existence, as if everything were in vain'.⁵⁹ Thus, for Nietzsche, nihilism is fundamentally a thwarted idealism: when *the* belief fails, only the nihilistic void is left. Where perspectivism, or at least relativism, would seem the most

⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §55 (p. 35).

⁵⁸ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §1 (p. 7).

⁵⁹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §55 (p. 35).

obvious recourse, there is rather an extreme reaction to the belief that *all* interpretations must be false.

Nihilism, for Nietzsche, stemmed from man's inability to accept that what he could not see, what he could not discover, could still exist: 'The immodesty of man: to deny meaning where he sees none'.⁶⁰ This is a direct indictment of humanity's search for meaning, in that if meaning does not become immediately apparent, humanity assumes that there must be none: 'Our will requires an aim; it would sooner have the void for its purpose than be void of purpose'.⁶¹ This leads Nietzsche to deny any philosophical 'truth' in nihilism, for it originates only in man's inability to accept the reality that truth is man-made:

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without serious power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.⁶²

Nietzsche's solution to the resulting nihilism is a Dionysian will-to-power which eternally makes and unmakes the world (opposed to an Apollonian will which seeks to stratify and codify the world), a world in which man is the centre but is concerned with building his own meaning:

This, my *Dionysian* world of the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying, this mystery world of the twofold voluptuous delight, my 'beyond good and evil,' without

⁶⁰ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §599 (p. 325).

⁶¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, collected in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. by Francis Golffing (New York: Anchor Press, 1956), III, §1 (p. 231); III, §28 (p. 299).

⁶² Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense', in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1976), pp. 42-47 (pp. 46-47).

goal, unless the joy of the circle is itself a goal; without will, unless a ring feels good will towards itself – do you want a *name* for this world? A *solution* for all its riddles? A *light* for you, too, you best-concealed, strongest, most intrepid, most midnightly men? – *This world is the will to power – and nothing besides!* And you yourselves are also this will to power – and nothing besides!⁶³

This then, for Nietzsche, is the sublime overcoming of nihilism, the solution to its problematic. Although nihilism devalues itself, it does not rebuild, whereas Nietzsche proposes a dualistic creative and destructive process, which Gillespie argues ‘is to its very core a world in opposition to itself, a world of constant and universal war in which every being seeks to conquer and subdue every other being’.⁶⁴ This sense of eternal conflict as the solution to social nihilism gave rise, in the early-twentieth century, to some of the most horrific experiences humanity had yet experienced. At this stage, nihilism becomes contemporary, meaning the same then as it does now, in the twenty-first century: mass destruction.

Authoritarian Nihilism (1889-1945)

In the twentieth century, nihilism has emerged as the defining factor of Western culture. This assertion indicates a certain perception in the historical formation of the twentieth century; that modernity, in the guise of the development of Enlightenment ideals, gave rise to the traumas that that century witnessed. This association of nihilism with modernity is a fundamental stage in the appropriation of nihilism, and a number of critics who perceive nihilism to be the dominant factor in twentieth-century culture argue this point, including Nietzsche (albeit with foresight), Heidegger, Karl Löwith, and Theodor Adorno. On one

⁶³ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §1067 (p. 550).

⁶⁴ Gillespie, p. 239.

side of the argument, Heidegger and Nietzsche oppose nihilism by straining against it, leading to the creation of a philosophical backbone for National Socialism. National Socialism (mis)read Nietzsche as advocating the supremacy of one kind of man, one race, above all others, and sought to destroy everything that was 'other' to this ideal. The Nietzschean *übermensch* became a symbol, not of the active overcoming of passive nihilism, but of an active, state-authorised nihilism attempting to eradicate all traces of otherness. Likewise, Heidegger's proposal for the recuperation of being, of *Dasein* [the process of being], led towards the active affirmation of an ideal over humanity. On the other side of the argument, seen in Adorno and Löwith, the Holocaust itself is the epitome of negation, of nihilism. The Holocaust is the point at which nihilism becomes no longer a *passive social* concern, but moves towards an *active social* nihilism – attempting, by way of ideological processes and genocide, to negate existence on a macro scale. The 'European sickness' noted by Nietzsche was no longer passive, but actively concerned with wholesale destruction. In both cases, because of the Holocaust, modernity always turns towards nihilism to explain itself.

That Nietzschean philosophy should come to this end is not solely a result of Elisabeth Nietzsche's treatment of his works (editing her brother's works to remove anything anti-nationalist or anti-fascist and emphasising anti-Semitic sentiments), or the Heideggerian reading that dominates the era. Certain problems exist within Nietzschean philosophy that make this reading possible. Although Nietzsche was staunchly anti-nationalist, the removal of certain mitigating characteristics of his philosophical framework recreates the will-to-power as the will-to-destruction; the destruction of what is Other. Löwith argued, paraphrasing Nietzsche's position on morality, that 'Morality becomes

replaced by the will to an end and hence by the will to the means toward that end'.⁶⁵ The world as will-to-power (and nothing besides!) relies strongly, perhaps too strongly, on the notion of conflict and destruction at the expense of morality. For Löwith, this also appears in Heidegger's philosophy:

The 'spirit' of National Socialism has to do not so much with the national and the social as with the kind of radical resoluteness and dynamic which rejects all discussion and genuine communication because it relies exclusively on itself – on the (German) capacity-for-Being which is always one's own. Without exception, it is expressions of power and resoluteness which characterize the vocabulary of National Socialist politics and Heidegger's philosophy.⁶⁶

In Löwith's view, Heidegger's political and philosophical association with National Socialism was not a plan for survival in a hostile regime, but a meeting between two similar philosophies.⁶⁷ Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* is identical to that ideal state, proposed by National Socialist philosophy, of *lebensraum* [living-space], where the individuals and nations exist in conflict with one another over available resources. Only the strong survive this conflict, and therefore the 'capacity-for-Being' is always from one's self.

Heidegger's works on the construction of Being frequently refer to nihilism and nothingness, but the two most explicit are 'What is Metaphysics?' and 'The Word of Nietzsche: "God is Dead"', which offer a summary of Heidegger's approach to nihilism without resorting to a detailed examination of his entire *corpus*. Heidegger's work on Being and nihilism was involved with the association of nihilism and metaphysics. Heidegger

⁶⁵ Karl Löwith, *Martin Heidegger & European Nihilism*, trans. by Gary Steiner, ed. by Richard Wolin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 208. Nietzsche's original statement is 'Replacement of morality by the will to our goal, and consequently to the means to it' – Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, § 880 (p. 470).

⁶⁶ Löwith, p. 219.

⁶⁷ See Löwith, pp. 216-25.

argued that you could not explore ‘that which is’ without recourse to ‘that which is not’. In his attempts to ‘take explicit possession’ of *Dasein*, he notes:

What should be examined are beings only, and besides that – nothing; beings alone, and further – nothing; solely beings, and beyond that – nothing.

What about this nothing? Is it an accident that we talk this way so automatically? Is it only a manner of speaking – and nothing besides?⁶⁸

His conclusion is that nothing is an integral aspect of Being, as without nothingness there is no Being. Furthermore, Heidegger argued that Being and nothingness co-exist in a continual tension not unlike Nietzsche’s concept of a Dionysian will-to-power:

The word ‘nihilism’ indicates that *nihil* (Nothing) *is*, and is essentially, in that which it names. Nihilism means: Nothing is befalling everything and in every respect. ‘Everything’ means what is, in its entirety. And whatever stands there in every respect proper to it when it is experienced as that which is. Hence, nihilism means that Nothing is befalling whatever is as such, in its entirety. But whatever is, what it is and how it is from out of Being. Assuming that every ‘is’ lies in Being, the essence of nihilism consists of the fact that Nothing is befalling Being itself.⁶⁹

If nothing functions as a negation, it is a negation fundamentally at odds with itself. Nothing is not part of a straightforward binary opposition between Being and nothing, but an implicit player in the creation of Being: ‘The nothing does not merely serve as the counterconcept of beings; rather, it originally belongs to their essential unfolding as such’.⁷⁰ This statement – ‘the nihilation of the nothing’ – is the result of Heidegger’s explanation of the ‘action’ of nothing:

⁶⁸ Martin Heidegger, ‘What is Metaphysics?’, in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. by David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 93-110 (p. 95).

⁶⁹ Heidegger, ‘The Word of Nietzsche’, pp. 110-11.

⁷⁰ Heidegger, ‘What is Metaphysics?’, p. 104.

This wholly repelling gesture towards beings that are in retreat as a whole, which is the action of the nothing that oppresses Dasein in anxiety, is the essence of nothing: nihilation. It is neither an annihilation of beings nor does it spring from a negation. Nihilation will not submit to calculation in terms of annihilation and negation. The nothing itself nihilates.⁷¹

‘The nothing itself nihilates’ is Krell’s translation of *Das Nicht Nichtet*, more commonly translated as ‘the nothing nots’. However, whilst the verb ‘nots’ conveys the original ‘Nichtet’, in the sense that this word is neologistic, Krell’s translation allows the reader to see a two-fold process. ‘The nothing itself nihilates’ shows that nothing has an action of nihilation (‘The nothing *nihilates*’) and that this action refers back to itself (‘The nothing nihilates *itself*’).

If Being and nothing are fundamentally related, then metaphysics (the study of Being) is fundamentally related to nihilism (the study of nothing) and nihilism is elevated to a ‘world-historical movement’:

If the essence of nihilism lies in history, so that the truth of Being remains wanting in the appearing of whatever is as such, in its entirety, and if, accordingly, Nothing is befalling Being and its truth, then metaphysics as the history of the truth of what is such, is, in its essence, nihilism. If, finally, metaphysics is the historical ground of the world history that is being determined by Europe and the West, then that world history is, in an entirely different sense, nihilistic.⁷²

If nihilism is implicitly located within metaphysics and metaphysics traces the movement of thought from Platonism to Nietzsche and Heidegger, then nihilism is an implicit aspect of world history. Asking about the condition of nihilistic history, Heidegger wrote at the end of

⁷¹ Heidegger, ‘What is Metaphysics?’, p. 103.

⁷² Heidegger, ‘The Word of Nietzsche’, p. 109.

‘What is Metaphysics?’: ‘Why are there beings at all, and why not rather nothing?’.⁷³ (Nihilistic) history must then ask the questions: Why is what is, as opposed to what is not? Why does what happen happen, as opposed to what does not? Nihilism is thus an implicit part of history, and the history of modernity.

Both Löwith and Adorno support this view of nihilism as an implicit aspect of modernity although their arguments indict Nietzsche and Heidegger. Löwith argued that the decline of Christianity led to the realisation of nihilism because, after Man became the measure of things, he then proceeded to negate himself:

At the same time as Marx and Kierkegaard, all the other radical followers of Hegel made the negation of what exists into the principle of their thinking. Marx destroys the capitalist world; Kierkegaard intensifies the ‘absolute negativity’ of romantic irony up to the point of leaping into faith; Stirner places himself upon ‘Nothing’; Feuerbach says that we must be ‘absolutely negative’ in order to create something new; and Bauer demands ‘heroic deeds from out of Nothing’ as the presupposition of new worlds.⁷⁴

The history of modernity is summarised by the motion towards negativity. This is trapped within the Hegelian dialectic of proposing the destruction (antithesis) of what exists (thesis) in order to bring about the advent of the New World Order (synthesis). Nietzsche and Heidegger, as players in this Hegelian game, did not bar the doors to nihilism but actually opened them wider and issued an invitation: not an *Überwindung* [overcoming] of nihilism, but a *Verwindung* [resigned acceptance] of it.⁷⁵ Rosen argues that whilst Heidegger’s intent ‘was to overcome European nihilism by setting the stage for a new understanding of “the

⁷³ Heidegger, ‘What is Metaphysics?’, p. 110.

⁷⁴ Löwith, p. 203.

⁷⁵ Vattimo notes in ‘Optimistic Nihilism’ (*Common Knowledge*, 1:3 (1992), 37-44) that the word *Verwindung* also carries traces of ‘convalescence’ within it because *Verwinden* ‘is the act of carrying the traces of an illness that has been overcome but not totally cancelled from the body’ (p. 38). This continues Nietzsche’s perception of nihilism as the ‘European sickness’, although it can never be completely overcome.

question of Being””, this was ‘transformed into a profound resignation in the face of nihilism’ as a very result of the history that was unfolding around him.⁷⁶ Heidegger, in trying to overcome Nietzschean nihilism, eventually succumbed to the illness. Löwith, in perceiving modernity to be the result of the decline of Christian morality and the rise of totalitarianism, blamed both Nietzsche and Heidegger for the fact that nihilism was squarely at the forefront of modernity and argued that it is through these attempts to overcome nihilism that nihilism came to be realised.

The expression of this thought is seen clearly in Adorno’s works, where modernity proceeds through the recuperation of nihilism. He writes that, ‘Acts of overcoming, even that of nihilism, together with the Nietzschean one that was otherwise intended but which still provided fascism with slogans, are always worse than what they overcome’.⁷⁷ As the abstract expression of thought, nihilism leads to destruction because ‘Nothingness is the acme of abstraction, and the abstract is the abominable’.⁷⁸ This does not fully explain, however, the association of nihilism with the Holocaust, because the Holocaust is anything but abstract to Adorno. Nihilism, as the spectre of abstract thought, is likened to the Holocaust because, ‘If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims’.⁷⁹ If thought does not hear itself because it is hearing nihilism, then the Holocaust is only one step away. This is why the Holocaust is, for Adorno, the epitome of nihilism. Like Löwith, Adorno argues that nihilism is not connected with *Nicht* [nothing] but with *Vernichtung* [destruction], a shift from nothing to the process of

⁷⁶ Rosen, pp. 101-102.

⁷⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 380.

⁷⁸ Adorno, p. 380.

⁷⁹ Adorno, p. 365.

making nothing, from absence to the extermination of presence. Adorno's response to nihilism illustrates the way in which the dialectical game, which occurs so frequently in twentieth-century discussions of nihilism, is played with loaded dice:

The true nihilists are the ones who oppose nihilism with their more and more faded positivities, the ones who are thus conspiring with all existant malice, and eventually with the destructive principle itself. Thought honors itself by defending what is damned as nihilism.⁸⁰

This distinction between 'the true nihilists' and 'nihilism' is due to the difference between those who strive against nothingness, no matter what the cost, believing at all times in their own truth, and a nihilism that rejects these 'petty' truths. 'Thought honors itself by defending what is damned as nihilism' does not mean that thought should defend nihilism, 'honour' here being given a positive implication, but that thought honours itself *at the expense of the Other* by defending what is damned *as nihilism*. The desire for thought to associate 'what is damned' with 'nihilism' occurs because thought needs something against which to strive or, as Simon Critchley phrases it, 'a straw man of meaninglessness that can easily be knocked down so that meaning can be restored'.⁸¹

If nihilism is the philosophy of absolute negation, then there can surely be no reason to for it to be, as Gianni Vattimo argues, 'our (only) chance'.⁸² However, in a 'postmodern' nihilism we find 'the extremity that eludes the concept' that Adorno desires because such a formulation of nihilism entails reflexivity. 'Postmodern nihilism' is a formulation of nihilism that comes about as a result of the association between nihilism and the sublime within the

⁸⁰ Adorno, p. 381.

⁸¹ Critchley, p. 20.

⁸² Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture*, trans. by Jon R. Snyder (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 23.

postmodern. This conflation occurs solely within the postmodern, although throughout the history of modernity the connection between the two concepts is implied. Thus, before showing the appearance of nihilism within postmodernism, we must first uncover the connections between nihilism and the sublime that exist *before* the postmodern era, in relation to the sublime and Enlightenment modernity.

Stylising the Sublime

Like nihilism, the sublime has a rich cultural heritage, although the sublime extends historically to the concept of beauty, rather than negation. This suggests that nihilism and the sublime bear little resemblance to one another to the extent that they may be considered opposed binary concepts. Such a perception is supported by the fact that nihilism became an independent concept during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, whereas the sublime dominated aesthetics during the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, preceding nihilism by at least a century. Although this seems to indicate two different concepts, the fact that the sublime was central to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century aesthetic discourse suggests that there was an ideological motivation behind the study of the sublime and that the construction of the sublime is implicated with the dominant ideologies of this period. As this period marks the rise of the Enlightenment Project, which has been hitherto been called ‘the process of modernity’, it is clear that both nihilism and the sublime were constructed within the same Enlightenment ideologies and were the result of the same social catalysts. This suggests that the sublime is only arbitrarily distinct from nihilism and that nihilism is actually a temporally-displaced formulation of the sublime.

Since an ideology constructs the sublime, there is an intention to its existence. It is as historically specific as nihilism, indicating the usefulness of the concept of sublimity to a particular historical consciousness. This cultural specificity means that cultural understandings of the sublime, like nihilism, shift diachronically. This is not an extraneous

observation, despite the fact that *all* concepts exist diachronically, because it warns us of the dangers of anachronism. As Martin Donougho argues, we must be wary of reading meanings into the sublime that were not actually present during a given period:

The sublime has by now come to form part of the furniture of our common world (artistic, philosophical, or everyday). Yet that should not blind us to the attendant fact that – as with other categories of aesthetics – the sublime is historically specific, and has been taken in a variety of ways. We should be wary of reifying it, therefore, but equally wary of reading one sense of the sublime backwards or forwards into another time period, thus assimilating history to theory. For all its historical contingency, we may nonetheless continue to speak of *the* sublime, or more cautiously, of *styles* of the sublime.¹

When reading formulations of the sublime we should always be aware that it is only a *reading* and that, as such, it is heavily reliant upon our understanding of the period at hand. Likewise, when we speak of ‘*styles* of the sublime’, we must also understand that we are speaking of *stylised* forms of the sublime within ideological constructions. If the sublime is an ideological construct, then what one period considers sublime is not necessarily sublime in another, and ‘the sublime, rightly understood, is not all things to all men’.² This explains why a number of different approaches to sublimity appeared after the initial resurgence of the concept during the seventeenth century, including Edmund Burke’s ‘psychological’ sublime, Immanuel Kant’s ‘noetic’ sublime, and the Romantic ‘natural’ sublime. Each of these uses the sublime in a different way, emphasising particular formulations of sublimity. These are therefore ‘stylised’ forms of the sublime, ‘styles’ of sublimity that originate within a given ideological discourse.

¹ Martin Donougho, ‘Stages of the Sublime in North America’, *Modern Language Notes*, 115:5 (2000), 909-40 (pp. 909-10).

² T. E. B. Wood, *The Word ‘Sublime’ and its context, 1650-1760* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), p. 210.

Sublime Texts and their Contexts

The ‘styles’ of the sublime seen in Burke, Kant, and the Romantics originate in the mid-seventeenth and late-eighteenth centuries, during the sudden enthusiasm for ‘aesthetic theory’. This sudden proliferation of styles of the sublime emerged from the ‘rediscovery’ of one of the earliest works of literary criticism, *Peri Hypsous* [*On Sublimity*], supposedly written by Cassius Longinus, was a Greek rhetorician and philosopher *circa* 213-273 CE, although it is more likely to be the work of a first-century philosopher now known as ‘Pseudo-Longinus’.³ The reason for the popularity of this text is primarily due to the translation by Nicholas Boileau-Despréaux in 1674, which fed into the emergent discourse on the nature of art, and was popularised by John Dryden and *The Spectator*.⁴ Longinus’ text is significant because it gave a formal, classical structure to seventeenth-century aesthetic discourse, defining a form of emotional ‘elevation’ that is possible through language and distinguishing between ‘beautiful’ and ‘sublime’ forms. This marks the arrival of ‘the sublime’ within English culture because ‘elevation’ or ‘height’ is the English translation of *hypsous* (ὑψους), which through the Latin *sublimis* [lofty or elevated language], came to mean a sublime

³ *Peri Hypsous* has alternatively been translated as ‘On Sublimity’ (D. A. Russell), ‘On Great Writing’ (G. M. A. Grube), and ‘On the Sublime’ (T. E. B. Wood). Although none of these are ‘literal’ translations (as this chapter will explore), Russell’s translation will be used because the suffix indicates the ‘quality or condition’ of the sublime (*OED*) rather than ‘the sublime’ itself, which is the aim of the text. In relation to its authorship, Russell observes in his introduction to *On Sublimity* (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1965) that an Augustan critic called Dionysius of Halicarnassus is far more likely to be the author than Cassius Longinus because of certain historical references within the text (see pp. x-xi). ‘Longinus’ is used throughout this chapter, but this refers to the author of *On Sublimity*, not to Cassius Longinus.

⁴ See Russell in Longinus, pp. xv-xvi. Boileau’s was not the first English translation, however, because John Hall first translated *On Sublimity* into English in 1652. Likewise, there is evidence of its use prior to this in John Milton’s *Tractate on Education* (1644) and George Chapman’s translation of Homer’s *Odyssey* (1615). The trajectory and influence of *On Sublimity* is confused as many writers of the seventeenth century used the word without immediate reference to Longinus’ work (see Wood, pp. 9-10).

feeling.⁵ Most of the structure of *On Sublimity* is concerned with rhetorical strategies in order to produce this feeling of ‘elevation’, although it frequently suggests the ability of sublime art to free the mind from language. This is an important debate in the classification of Longinus’ sublime, and is worthy of some discussion.

Although it is a reductive assertion, there is a discursive shift between the sublime as a ‘rhetorical’ form and a ‘natural’ form during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Samuel Monk argues that the development from Longinus’ rhetorical model to the Burkean natural model within this period is of primary importance in establishing the development of the concept of the sublime during the eighteenth century. This is a shift from an ‘aesthetic’ sublime to an ‘ethical’ sublime, an observation that becomes important in relation to Kant’s understanding of the sublime. Monk argues: ‘Once it was seen that the sublime is a state of mind evoked by objects and ideas, the objective criteria of the rules were gradually invalidated’.⁶ Other critics, however, have argued that this is too extreme. For example, T. E. B. Wood argues that he ‘cannot really agree with any of this unless qualified to the extent of removing its impact’, because Longinus’ sublime is ‘a phenomenon that exists where the demands of form, appropriate subject matter, and artistic inspiration are fused’ and not purely rhetorical.⁷ Monk suggests that the definition of a rhetorical sublime is ‘wrong’ and a natural sublime is ‘right’, a construction far too blindly asserted. Nevertheless, the argument, even when qualified, does retain enough impact to bear scrutiny. The eighteenth-century

⁵ Here we can understand the significance of *On Sublimity* in relation to Alexander Pope’s satire of rhetorical strategies in *Martinus Scriblerius peri Bathuons; or, The Art of Sinking in Poetry* (1728) through the opposition between ‘elevated’ art (*hypsous*) and ‘sinking’ art (*bathuons*). Russell, however, sees this as a misinterpretation of *hypsous*. See Longinus, p. 2, n. 1.

⁶ Samuel Holt Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), p. 236.

⁷ Wood, pp. 21, 36.

sublime is, however, not purely natural or psychological but a mix of classical and romantic definitions, and the interpretation of *On Sublimity* is an integral part of this debate.

Without entering into the debate over where sublimity of art resides, whether in the artist's formal conception or the audience's response, the structure of *On Sublimity* is *generally* more concerned with rhetoric (form) than nature (response), whereas the Burkean formulation of the sublime is *generally* more about nature than rhetoric. *On Sublimity* is primarily concerned with rhetorical strategies in producing 'sublime' writing. Its structure follows the 'five sources of sublimity' listed in Longinus' preface to the text: 'the power to conceive great thoughts', 'strong and inspired emotion', 'certain kinds of figures', 'noble diction', and 'dignified and elevated word-arrangement'.⁸ Of these five sections, only one is intrinsically related to the 'natural' sublime – 'strong and inspired emotion' – although even this has only two subsections of its five concerned with nature. However, it is impossible to argue that *On Sublimity* is concerned solely with rhetoric:

Experience in invention and ability to order and arrange material cannot be detected in single passages; we begin to appreciate them only when we see the whole context. Sublimity, on the other hand, produced at the right moment, tears everything up like a whirlwind, and exhibits the orator's whole power at a single blow.⁹

Without the 'whirlwind' of emotion there can be no sublime – 'experience in invention' is not enough. This implies that rhetorical strategy alone is not enough to produce sublimity. Furthermore, the passage conflates rhetorical and natural constructions of the sublime because rhetoric is subsumed by natural metaphor and nature is reconstructed as an aspect of rhetoric: speech is a 'whirlwind', although it is 'produced at the right moment' and

⁸ Longinus, §8 (p. 8).

⁹ Longinus, §1 (p. 2).

‘exhibits the orator’s whole power’. This is seen clearly in Longinus’ comparison of Hyperides and Demosthenes, where although Hyperides ‘reproduces all the good features of Demosthenes’ he does not excite the emotions of his audience, unlike Demosthenes’ powerful rhetoric: ‘The crash of his thunder, the brilliance of his lightning’.¹⁰ The message is that technique is not enough, and that there must be some stroke of genius – Boileau’s ineffable *je ne sais quoi* – in order to impart an artwork with ‘sublime’ feeling: this genius is not bred but born and is therefore akin to a natural, not rhetorical, formulation of the sublime.

Wood disagrees with Monk because he feels that Monk ‘essentialises’ eighteenth-century formulations of the sublime that are ‘a complicated blend, if you will, of the traditional [Wood defines this as ‘form, genre, and decorum’] and psychological conceptions of what the artistic process and the art work are’.¹¹ This is due to the proliferation of ‘aesthetic theory’ within the eighteenth century that ranges, as Peter de Bolla argues, ‘from “general works” through architecture and gardening, pictorial and plastic arts, literature and drama, to music’.¹² Although de Bolla calls it a reductive description, he defines ‘aesthetic theory’ as ‘the relationship between a theory and the objects it describes and analyses’.¹³ This proliferation of ‘aesthetic theory’ suggests a historical context that gestures towards an explanation of both Longinus’ text and his popularity during the neoclassical period. The conception of *On Sublimity* occurred during a period when rhetoric was the doctrinal core of civilisation and art and had been since the height of Attic art.¹⁴ Longinus was arguably seeking to incorporate the idea of genius, of artistic creativity, into this stagnant doctrine, an

¹⁰ Longinus, §34 (pp. 40-41).

¹¹ Wood, pp. 17-18, n. 2.

¹² Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 29

¹³ de Bolla, p. 29.

¹⁴ See Russell in Longinus, p. xi.

interpretation of the sublime mode in which ‘Our thoughts often travel beyond the boundaries of our surroundings’.¹⁵ Likewise, the neoclassical era was attempting to assert a style that was both independent and classical, fusing classical forms with new rhetorical strategies. The translation of Longinus during this period gave credence to the idea of a *creative* rhetoric, not a *mimetic* one.

This discursive and ideological shift of sublimity is an integral part of demonstrating the link between nihilism and the sublime. Given Monk’s proposition of the rhetorical form of Longinus’ sublime and Wood’s subsequent qualification, it is clear that the Burkean and Kantian formulations of the sublime both move towards a psychological or rational approach to the sublime. One of the most important ways in which we see this shift occur is in the ‘Contexts’ that Wood gives the reader. Wood summarises a number of different sources to demonstrate the uses seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers made of the sublime. Wood’s survey is important because of the idea of ‘elevation’ that recurs throughout his sources: ‘Defining “hupsous” as “elevation”, it is immediately apparent that, if anything, its interpretation widens during the century, because in addition to the retention of older meanings [...] there is the addition of the psychological school’s usage of the word’.¹⁶ Wood also argues that ‘There is no doubt that the eighteenth century yoked Longinus, Christianity, and the Bible together *in order to serve its purposes*’ (my emphasis).¹⁷ These two statements reveal that throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there is an ideological shift in the use of the sublime, and that furthermore this shift indicates a move away from the idea of divine elevation towards a more natural or psychological elevation of the human. Although Wood argues this to be a ‘widening’, it is possible to see

¹⁵ Longinus, §35 (p. 42).

¹⁶ Wood, p. 209.

¹⁷ Wood, p. 29.

this as a shift in the dominant paradigm of the sublime from ‘divine elevation’ to ‘humanist elevation’. In order to ‘widen’ the sublime, the ‘divine’ would have to retain its importance. However, the sublime elevates humanity *over* divinity to replicate the dominant ideology of Enlightenment humanism, thereby suggesting a paradigm shift signifying the alteration, not extension, of the parameters of the sublime.

These arguments parallel the movement presented in the previous chapter, where the rise of nihilism was connected with the decline of religious and classical authority. This is what Gillespie calls ‘a new concept of divine omnipotence and a corresponding concept of human power’, where the religious makes way for the secular, where the human gradually replaces the divine.¹⁸ This was primarily understood to be a movement in the concept of nihilism, but is now *also* seen in conceptions of the sublime, since the sublime began as a predominantly classical or religious model of ‘elevation’ and shifted towards a psychological and natural phenomenon – a movement from religion to empiricism, from faith to rationality. This shift occurs in the development of the concept under Enlightenment rationality, most notably exemplified in the formulations of Burke and Kant.

The Burkean Formulation of the Sublime

Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) presented the sublime as a phenomenon that transcended the empirical world but not the imagination.¹⁹ From this foundation, we see that Burke’s notion of the sublime is predicated upon terror; the sublime, for Burke, exists primarily as an immediate emotional response to

¹⁸ Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. vii.

¹⁹ Years of publication will be included for primary treatises on the sublime because this chapter is not as chronologically explicit as the preceding chapter on nihilism.

‘dangerous’ objects before reason can engage itself. This creates two different approaches to understanding the Burkean sublime: one that immediately affects the observer with a sense of danger and one that relies upon the imagination of the individual in the face of possible danger. An example might be a person standing at the foot of a mountain imagining an avalanche. In the first instance, it is sublime because his emotions are ruling his reason, causing him to imagine something that he cannot sense and, in the second, were an avalanche to *actually* fall down on him, it would so overwhelm his senses that his reason would temporarily be overwhelmed. This is obviously an artificial scenario, however, because the body must not be actually harmed, just feel itself to be in ‘harm’s way’. The Burkean sublime haunts reason – it is when imagination and the irrational have temporary control over the rational – and is generally produced as an emotional response to a perceived danger.

That the sublime is an emotional response is an important aspect of Burke’s *Enquiry*, for he does not direct his studies towards an aesthetic representation (a rhetorical analysis) of the sublime except in part. Burke’s main objective is to classify the mechanisms by which the sublime manifests itself:

I am afraid it is a practice much too common in inquiries of this nature, to attribute the cause of feelings which merely arise from the mechanical structure of our bodies, or from the natural frame and constitution of our minds, to certain conclusions of the reasoning faculty on the objects presented to us; for I should imagine, that the influence of reason in producing our passions is nothing near so extensive as it is commonly believed.²⁰

This passage demonstrates the disdain that Burke feels towards a sublime produced by the rational mind (an aesthetic sublime). This suggests, as we have seen, a movement away from

²⁰ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. by Adam Philips (Glasgow: Oxford World Classics, 1998), I, §13 (p. 41).

a rhetorical form of the sublime towards a more empirical representation of the sublime originating from 'being in the world'. For Burke, the sublime is a primal response that occurs within the body before the rational mind can attempt to grasp the 'dangerous' object: there is an unremitting immediacy within the Burkean sublime that comes from the inability of reason to respond to such objects.

The definition of 'dangerous' objects is qualified by Burke, and can be characterised as those connected with power, magnitude, and infinity. Each of these, to some degree, produces a feeling of terror in the observer, due to the very inability of the rational mind to comprehend them. Indeed, Burke writes that 'obscurity' aids the creation of sublimity: 'To make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes'.²¹ As reason begins to classify the sublime object, it ceases to be sublime precisely because we have become accustomed to it. Wordsworth suggests this in *The Prelude* (1850) when he writes:

That men, least sensitive, see, hear, perceive,
And cannot choose but feel. The power, which all
Acknowledge when thus moved, which Nature thus
To bodily sense exhibits.²²

Here, we see the way in which the Burkean sublime affects the observer of nature – he 'cannot choose but feel' and feels it 'bodily'.²³ Without the initial apprehension of the object,

²¹ Burke, II, §3 (p. 54).

²² William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)*, ed. by Jonathan Wordsworth (London: Penguin, 1995), XIV. 85 (p. 515). All references to Wordsworth are from the 1850 edition of *The Prelude*.

there would be no sublime. Consider, for example, Burke's discussion of the nature of power in connection with the sublime. He writes:

Pain is always inflicted by a power in some way superior, because we never submit willingly. So that strength, violence, pain and terror, are ideas that rush in upon the mind together. Look at a man, or any other animal of prodigious strength, and what is your idea before reflection? Is it that this strength will be subservient to you, to your ease, to your pleasure, to your interest in any sense? No; the emotion you feel is, lest this enormous strength should be employed to the purposes of rapine and destruction. That power derives all its sublimity from the terror with which it is generally accompanied, will appear evidently from its effect in the very few cases, in which it may be possible to strip a considerable degree of strength of its ability to hurt. When you do this, you spoil it of every thing sublime, and it immediately becomes contemptible.²⁴

What is sublime about the appearance of something powerful is that object's intrinsic undecidability. Were we to accept that it was 'under' us, to be rationally aware of its limitations and uses, it would not be sublime. The three wanderers that Wordsworth encounters on Snowdon are examples of this, because of their 'majestic intellect': 'There I beheld an emblem of a mind / That feeds upon infinity, that broods / Over the dark abyss, intent to hear'.²⁵ These wanderers may be rational, but they 'feed' on nature and 'brood' on concepts. They are too 'intent to hear' to ever hear anything, as Wordsworth later writes: 'moral judgements which from this pure source / Must come, or will by man be sought in vain'.²⁶ The mind must be open to Nature, not searching for a sublime experience.

²³ There are problems with incorporating the Wordsworthian conception of the sublime into Burke because Wordsworth suggests that this ability to feel is inherent within certain people, as *The Prelude* states after the discussion of 'bodily sense': 'that glorious faculty / That higher minds bear with them as their own' (XIV. 89 (p. 515)). This suggests that it is, in fact, a way of thinking, an openness to the world, which creates the sublime feeling. This sublimity is not pre-rational, but purely noetic, suggesting a Kantian, not Burkean, modulation. Despite this, Wordsworth does serve to *illustrate*, although not *prove*, Burke's sublime.

²⁴ Burke, II, §5 (p. 60).

²⁵ Wordsworth, XIV. 70 (p. 515).

²⁶ Wordsworth, XIV. 128 (p. 517).

‘Obscurity’ is why, according to Burke, power is sublime. It is precisely because we do not know how power will affect us that the initial terror causes a sublime feeling: its origins and intent are obscured and we are faced with potential harm. The same mechanism creates sublimity in relation to magnitude and infinity. Burke writes that ‘Greatness of dimension, is a powerful cause of the sublime’ and that ‘Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime’.²⁷ Both of these come from immediate, not mediated sources, and the terror originates from the fact that the rational mind has yet to come to terms with them. It is for this reason that the Burkean mode of sublimity is both affective (and thus pre-rational) and a ‘moment’ (being produced and dissipating simultaneously). Although Burke argues that some terror remains with us after the sublime experience, this is a sublime ‘aftershock’ and not the sublime experience itself.

The concept of ‘magnitude’ is of interest here as it marks a point of divergence away from Longinus’ idea of ‘elevation’ and later becomes significant in the development of the postmodern sublime. In *On Sublimity*, Longinus at one point defines the difference between *hypsous* [elevation] and *megethos* [size]: ‘The difference lies, in my opinion, on the fact that sublimity depends on elevation [*hypsous*], whereas amplification [*megethos*] involves extension; sublimity exists often in a single thought, amplification cannot exist without a certain quantity and superfluity’.²⁸ Burke, in contrast, writes that ‘extension is either in length, height, or depth’, devaluing the concept of elevation, and adds that ‘height is less grand than depth’, seemingly suggesting the alternate Latinate etymology of ‘sublime’ as *sub-limen* [under the threshold], not *sublimis*.²⁹ Thomas Weiskel does observe, however, that ‘Height and depth are

²⁷ Burke, II, §7 (p. 67); II, §8 (p. 67).

²⁸ Longinus, §12 (p. 17). See also Russell in Longinus, pp. xvi-xvii.

²⁹ Burke, II, §7 (p. 66).

of course merely two perspectives for the same dimension of verticality; what is “lofty” for the idealist will be “profound” for the naturalizing mind.³⁰ This point also marks an extension of the Burkean sublime into the Kantian in the sense that an object is sublime in relation to magnitude only if it is a unitary object that is perceived, not a quantity of objects, suggesting the Kantian requirement of a ‘totality’ to be present in the sublime (discussed later in this chapter). This is because ‘The sum total of things of various kinds, though it should equal the number of uniform parts composing some *one* entire object, is not equal in its effect upon the organs of our bodies’. Burke qualifies this requirement for ‘unity’ later in the passage, although it is not entirely clear: ‘So that every thing great by its quantity must necessarily be, one, simple, and entire’.³¹ Where Longinus declares that it is the quantity of objects that creates a feeling of amplification distinct from sublimity, and Kant argues that only a totality (a unified object) can be sublime, Burke argues that a quantity of *uniform* objects can lead to sublimity *providing they seem to be an undifferentiated whole*.

If the Burkean sublime is based upon the immediate apprehension of an ‘apparent’ object, the relation between Burke and nihilism initially seems tenuous. However, nothingness can, under these conditions, produce a mode of the sublime similar to that which Burke proposed. Several aspects of the Burkean sublime suggest that nothingness is sublime because it is unfathomable. In his discussion of ‘obscurity’, Burke quotes an example from John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667):

The other shape,
If shape it might be call’d that shape had none

³⁰ Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986), p. 24. This again suggests a distinction between *pathos* and *bathos*, between sublimity and profundity, and between ‘elevation’ and ‘amplification’.

³¹ Burke, IV, §10 (p. 126).

Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb,
 Or substance might be call'd that shadow seem'd,
 For each seem'd either; black it stood as Night,
 Fierce as ten Furies, terrible as Hell,
 And shook a dreadful Dart; what seem'd his head
 The likeness of a Kingly Crown had on.³²

Burke argues that this is sublime because ‘All is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree’.³³ Other examples of this ‘sublime void’ abound in Book Two of *Paradise Lost*: ‘the dark unbottom’d infinite Abyss’, ‘the void profound / of unessential night’, ‘with lonely steps to tread / Th’unfounded deep, and through the void immense / to search’.³⁴ It is this very uncertainty and confusion – the inability of the rational mind to comprehend – that makes nihilism a candidate for sublimity. To find a pun in one of Burke’s descriptions, he writes: ‘The ideas of eternity, and infinity, are among the most affecting we have, and yet *there is nothing of which we really understand so little*, as of infinity and eternity’ (my emphasis).³⁵ The notion of understanding brings to the fore the concept of nihilism. ‘There is nothing of which we understand so little’ *except for perhaps nothingness itself*. Although we cannot understand infinity, or eternity (an extension of the infinite into time), neither can we understand nothingness, standing as we do on the side of Being. That is, we do not understand nothingness, and yet it can produce a strong emotional response within us, precisely because of the incapacity of the rational to comprehend the essentially irrational. If the sublime is pre-rational and we cannot rationalise nothingness, then nothingness *when presented* can be considered a sublime form.

³² John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (London: Penguin, 1989), II. 666 (p. 46).

³³ Burke, II, §3 (p. 55).

³⁴ Milton, II. 405, 438, 828 (pp. 39, 40, 50).

³⁵ Burke, II, §4 (p. 57).

There are, of course, counter-arguments to this production of the Burkean sublime through nihilism. One of the most important of these is the requirement of immediate danger. Although nihilism can threaten our sense of Being, and does indeed correspond to a ‘threat to Being’, it is not enough to justify a sense of danger merely from the thought of nihilism. The Burkean sublime is connected with physically existing objects – the presentation of the object – and although nihilism may be the most terrifying of all possibilities and objects, it can never be considered ‘physically existent’. When Burke defines the difference between pain and terror we see that nihilism, whilst producing a response, can never actually produce the type of sublime that Burke discusses:

The only difference between pain and terror, is, that things which cause pain operate on the mind, by the intervention of the body; whereas things that cause terror generally affect the bodily organs by the operation of the mind suggesting the danger; but both agreeing, either primarily, or secondarily, in producing a tension, contraction, or violent emotion of the nerves.³⁶

That nihilism and a sense of nothingness can produce terror in the reader is indeed arguable. However, the problem is that the emotional response to nihilism tends to be existential despair or fear of meaninglessness; despair does not produce the sublime mode, and the fear provoked by nothingness does not entail a further physical response. Although conceiving absence may be terrifying, it is not ‘present enough’ to threaten the viewer’s sense of being.

This does not mean to say, however, that the production of a nihilistic sublime is impossible.³⁷ It only implies that attempting to conflate a nihilistic moment with a sublime

³⁶ Burke, IV, §3 (p. 120).

³⁷ This is precisely that to which Donougho refers when he argues that we must be careful of appending meanings to the sublime that may not be present within the sublime itself. Any readings of a ‘nihilistic sublime’ must finally occur on the terms of the sublime itself, and the historical period in which it comes forth, and cannot merely be conflated because of similarities.

moment is problematic under the Burkean mode of sublimity. In the final analysis, Burke's comments about darkness may be crucial to understanding a nihilistic sublime, and demonstrate why other conceptions of the sublime are necessary before we can finally see a nihilistic sublime emerge:

Such a tension it seems there certainly is, whilst we are involved in darkness; for in such a state whilst the eye remains open, there is a continual nisus to receive light; this is manifest from the flashes, and luminous appearances which often seem in these circumstances to play before it, and which can be nothing but spasms, produced by its own efforts in pursuit of its object.³⁸

In a struggle to find meaning in nihilism, the critic frequently sees flashes of inspiration that are, in fact, no more than illusory mechanisms of the mind itself. In darkness, nothing can be seen (but we cannot see 'nothing') and in response to this darkness, the mind creates objects to fill the void. The problem is not with illuminating nihilism, but with our very seeking of illumination, that euphemism for 'understanding'. Rather, it is in our very inability to understand nihilism that we see the nihilistic sublime, and why this argument must move forward towards the Kantian formulation of the sublime.

The Kantian Formulation of the Sublime

The Kantian sublime appears primarily within two of Kant's works, *The Critique of Judgement* (1790) and *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764), both of which are heavily influenced by the debate on the nature of the sublime written by Burke, as well as other eighteenth-century aesthetic theorists. There are number of initial similarities between

³⁸ Burke, IV, §16 (p. 132).

the Burkean and Kantian sublimities, such as the comparisons between beauty and sublimity, the concern with what can be apprehended not comprehended, and thus the invocation of the sublime through feelings of terror.³⁹ Kant's texts are problematic from the perspective of a study of the sublime because in the interim period between publications there are a number of significant alterations to Kant's formulation of the sublime, not least of which is its movement away from the empirical study of the sublime. For example, although Monique David-Ménard sees a number of links between both *Observations* and *The Critique of Judgement*, she rightly concludes that there is a 'radical reversal' in Kant's thought between *Observations* and *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), which implies an increased distance between *Observations* and *The Critique of Judgement*.⁴⁰

Despite this, the later formulation of the sublime found in *The Critique of Judgement* is significantly different from Burke's *Enquiry* not only in that it moves away from the empiricism present in Burke (and in Kant's earlier *Observations*), but that in so doing Kant also brings together the notions of morality and beauty/sublimity.⁴¹ In contrast to those eighteenth-century aesthetic theorists who, 'sought to liberate the realm of aesthetics from its submission to ethics, or in another formulation, to distinguish a kind of feeling in which no desire was implicated', Kant deliberately associated the feeling of the sublime with morality, and thus implicated aesthetics with ethics.⁴² This synthesis of previously dichotomous concepts (ethics and aesthetics) demonstrates the Kantian sublime to be primarily dialectical.

³⁹ 'Apprehended' here means the initial presentation of an object, but it also carries the suggestion 'apprehension', that is, anxiety and terror. In contrast, 'comprehension' means that the rational mind can 'grasp' the object, thereby ensuring that it is not sublime.

⁴⁰ Monique David-Ménard, 'Kant's "An Essay on the Maladies of the Mind" and *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*', trans. by Alison Ross, *Hyppatia*, 15:4 (2000), 82-98 (p. 93).

⁴¹ See Eva Schaper, 'Taste, sublimity, and genius: The aesthetics of nature and art', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*, ed. by Paul Guyer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 367-93 (pp. 381-82).

⁴² John Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant's 'Critique of Judgment'* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 273.

This is an important shift, and one that is especially relevant to those postmodern studies of the sublime that are fundamentally predicated upon the Kantian model.

Two principles are involved in the discussion of the Kantian sublime – the mathematical and the dynamic. These allow the Kantian sublime to resolve the duality of aesthetics and ethics. The mathematical sublime (§25-27 of *The Critique of Judgement*) is seemingly concerned with the reception of magnitude by the senses, as with the Burkean sublime, just as the dynamic sublime (§28 and §29) seems to initially correspond to ideas of might, power, and terror. Thus, it may be incorrectly assumed that Kant merely divided the Burkean sublime into two distinct ideas. This, however, is not entirely accurate, as the distinction formulated by Kant indicates:

Hence it [the feeling of the sublime] is referred through the imagination either to the *faculty of cognition* or to that of *desire*; but to whichever faculty the reference is made to the finality of the given representation is estimated only in respect of these faculties (apart from end or interest). Accordingly the first is attributed to the Object as a *mathematical*, the second as a *dynamical*, affection of the imagination. Hence we get the above double mode of representing an object as sublime.⁴³

Although Kant divided the Burkean sublime into two, these distinctions are more subtle than merely cleaving it into ‘sense’ and ‘size’ categories; rather, Kant distinguished between those objects of the sublime that are referred to as the ‘rational’ and the ‘emotional’. Thus, the dynamically sublime corresponds to those objects that are a ‘source of fear’, whilst the mathematical sublime corresponds to those objects about which the ‘imagining’ mind is

⁴³ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), §24/247 (p. 94). The second section number is an alternative form of reference that refers to the secondary divisions present in this text.

incapable of forming a coherent idea because they do not conform to our patterns of thought.⁴⁴

At this point, we see one of the fundamental distinctions between the Burkean and the Kantian formulations of the sublime: the Burkean sublime is predicated upon the notion of the senses, that the sublime is an empirical phenomenon arising from circumstance, whilst the Kantian sublime actually arises from mental activity. In opposition to Burke's 'physiological' sublime, which is a 'merely empirical exposition of [where] the sublime and beautiful would bring us', the Kantian sublime is 'transcendental'.⁴⁵ Where Burke argues that the sublime originates from the pre-rational apprehension of an object, Kant argues that no judgement on sublimity can ever be pre-rational and that, in fact, it is only through our reason that the sublime may occur. One might consider Wordsworth here:

Mighty is the charm
Of those abstractions to a mind beset
With images, and haunted by herself,
And specially delightful unto me
Was that clear synthesis built up aloft
So gracefully; even then when it appeared
Not more than a mere plaything, or a toy
To a sense embodied: not the thing it is
In verity, an independent world,
Created out of pure intelligence.⁴⁶

Although the sublime may be produced by a 'sensed' object, our own mind provides the feeling: 'It comes that the sublime is not to be looked for in the things of nature, but only in

⁴⁴ Kant, §28/260 (p. 109).

⁴⁵ Kant, §29/277 (p. 130).

⁴⁶ Wordsworth, VI. 158 (p. 217).

our own ideas. But it must be left to Deduction to show in which of them it resides'.⁴⁷ Whilst Burke argued that the sublime is that which is observed and felt – the sense of terror created by a dangerous, empirically-sensed object – Kant argued that the sublime is created by a *mental* object and is thus not empirical: it is 'created out of pure intelligence'. That is, Burke argued that the object is the important aspect of sublimity, which creates in the observer the feeling of terror necessary to create the sublime re-vivification of the self. Kant, in contrast, argued that our innate ability to create the sublime leads to the sublime feeling, and that the object is not as important as the observer's ability to feel the sublime.

To clarify this, consider these formulations in relation to an immense mountain. For Burke, this object creates sublimity by its size relative to us, causing terror as the sense of selfhood becomes obliterated by the immensity of what our senses dictate, a *reception* of the mountain that creates a feeling in the observer. For Kant too, this object may be (dynamically) sublime, but the sublime feeling originates not in our reception of the mountain, which only acts as a catalyst for our own mind: it is our *idea* of the mountain that creates the feeling of the sublime. To quote from *The Prelude* again:

That very day,
 From a bare ridge we also first beheld
 Unveiled the summit of Mont Blanc, and grieved
 To have a soulless image on the eye
 That had usurped upon a living thought
 That never more could be.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Kant, §25/250 (p. 97).

⁴⁸ Wordsworth, VI. 524 (p. 237).

Here, we see that the reality of Mont Blanc *rid* Wordsworth of the sublime feeling because the reality of the mountain is a ‘soulless image’. Wordsworth felt that it was not as powerful as the feeling created by his imagination, and ‘had usurped upon a living thought / That never more could be’. For this reason, the trip over the Alps is anticlimactic: ‘But every word that from the peasant’s lips / Came in reply, translated by our feelings, / Ended in this, – *that we had crossed the Alps*’.⁴⁹ Wordsworth crossed the Alps without experiencing the sublimity of nature as it was presented to him. To Wordsworth, it is not the presentation of an object that causes sublimity, but his imagination. Kant argues thus:

Who would apply the term ‘sublime’ even to shapeless mountain masses towering above one another, with their pyramids of ice, or to the dark tempestuous ocean or such like things? But in the contemplation of them, *without regard to their form*, the mind abandons itself to the imagination and to a reason placed, though quite apart from any definite end, in conjunction therewith, and merely broadening its view, and feels itself elevated in its own estimate of itself on finding all the might of the imagination still unequal to its ideas.⁵⁰ (My emphasis)

Although the eyes and senses cannot truly detect the object, the experience is still sublime because the mind – reason – can create an idea of them that is beyond that of the imagination to comprehend. This supersensible idea of the sublime distinguishes the Kantian formulation from the earlier, more pre-rational, sense of the Burkean sublime. The sublime is actually, as John Zammito argues, ‘a phenomenal experience’ that creates ‘a reflection in the subject not regarding the object but regarding itself [...]. In short, the sublime is an experience which occasions self-consciousness through aesthetic reflection’. Zammito later concludes that, ‘Kant’s whole theory of the sublime revolved around “subreption” – viewing an object of nature as though it were the ground of a feeling which in fact had its source in

⁴⁹ Wordsworth, VI. 589 (p. 239).

⁵⁰ Kant, §26/256 (p. 105).

the self.⁵¹ The mountain itself is only important, to the Kantian formulation, for the mind to create an image of the mountain; it is the ‘sense’ of the mountain, not the ‘sensed’ mountain, which allows us to create the sublime feeling *in ourselves*. In turning away from the empirical, Kant created the necessary step towards an ethical dimension of the aesthetic experience of the sublime.

This is central to Kant’s thesis. The sense of *Geistesgefühl* [sentiment of the mind], the ability of people to represent the sublime in objects, is a human faculty, both moral (ethical) and aesthetic. The object itself is not sublime because *it is our ability to represent the sublime within an object creates the feeling of sublimity*. That this is a moral action in the Kantian sublime is revealed in Kant’s discussion on the law of reason that, ‘we should esteem as small in comparison with ideas of reason everything which for us is great in nature as an object of sense’.⁵² The inability of the imagination to comprehend an object creates, for reason, a feeling of sublimity because we ‘find every standard of sensibility falling short of the ideas of reason’.⁵³ This, in itself, does not seem intrinsically moral, but it must be remembered that, for Kant, the entire principle of *The Critique of Judgement* was not the explication of the sublime, but the revelation of the connection between free will and the natural world. Although this does not seem to connect the sublime and ethics, it is in Kant’s method of reconciling these that the sublime originates.

At this point, it is worth departing from a discussion of the Kantian sublime and returning, albeit briefly, to the study of nihilism in Gillespie’s *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*. We have seen that Gillespie finds Nietzsche’s understanding of nihilism to be fundamentally flawed, and discusses the origins of nihilism from the ‘decline’ of God seen in Descartes’

⁵¹ Zammito, pp. 278, 280.

⁵² Kant, §27/257-58 (p. 106).

⁵³ Kant, §27/257-58 (p. 106).

philosophy. It is pertinent to a discussion on the sublime because Kant figures in this argument, and Gillespie rather eloquently describes the problem facing Kant in reconciling human moral law (freedom) with natural law. He writes:

If the laws of nature applied to things-in-themselves, human freedom would be impossible and, if there were no human freedom, there could be no moral law, since individuals would not be responsible for their actions. The existence of a moral law is an indication that human beings are free and thus something different from all other natural beings, not mere means or links in the chain of natural causation but ends in themselves, beings who can originate action. The apparent contradiction of nature and freedom that appeared in the antinomy of reason and causality is thus resolved by transcendental idealism.⁵⁴

For Kant, there was an intrinsic problem in the concept of both human free will and natural causality existing simultaneously. Gillespie argues that this means ‘man is both in nature and above it’ because ‘he is thoroughly determined by natural necessity through his passions and desires’ and yet ‘his will, however, is free, for it can recognise what ought to be and elevate itself above its natural impulses’.⁵⁵ He summarises by saying that, ‘Man stands between nature and the divine and is pulled by powerful forces in opposite directions. The transcendence of nature through moral law, however, is the sole legitimate end of human life’.⁵⁶ Although this goal can never be reached, it is man’s duty to free himself from nature – indeed his own nature – and become more through the extension of his capacity for reason. Kant’s ‘transcendent idealism’ proclaimed humanity the new ruler of nature, and because this devalued God (in readings such as Fichte’s), it is perceived as nihilistic.

⁵⁴ Gillespie, pp. 71-72.

⁵⁵ Gillespie, p. 72.

⁵⁶ Gillespie, p. 72.

At this point we begin to see the threads of the Kantian sublime drawing together, for it is through the sublime that the nature of man (and, indeed, Nature) can be defeated by the supremacy of reason. Thus, Kant created an ‘Enlightenment’ sublime, where reason is proclaimed the new God and man gains dominion over the world. Although humanity may never be free from nature *per se*, because it exists within the natural world, it is free inasmuch as ‘will’ is free from ‘imagination’ during sublime moments of experience. We see here a re-modulation of Longinus’ concept of sublime freedom where the sublime frees man from the world through his own nature (‘It is our nature to be exalted and elevated by true sublimity’) and deifies humanity (‘sublimity raises us towards the spiritual greatness of a god’).⁵⁷ This is unlike the Burkean sublime, in which sublimity is produced by a ‘trapped’ physicality in the pain/pleasure dimension. Zammito agrees with Gillespie on this point, arguing that ‘What Kant appears to have meant is that the reconciliation of the laws of nature and the laws of freedom could be thought only in terms of the idea of a “supersensible ground”, the transcendent unity of nature and man’.⁵⁸ According to Zammito, Kant’s aim of reconstructing a bridge between man and nature was only possible with the construction of a sublimity that originated in the inter-relation between man and nature. This is seen throughout *The Critique of Judgement*, sometimes ambiguously, but nowhere more clearly than when Kant writes:

The feeling of the sublime is, therefore, at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation by reason, and a simultaneously awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgment of the inadequacy of the greatest faculty of sense being in accord with ideas of reason, so far as the effort to attain to these is for us a law.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Longinus, §7 (p. 7); §36 (p. 42).

⁵⁸ Zammito, p. 266.

⁵⁹ Kant, §27/257 (p. 106).

This is the reason why the Burkean sublime, despite its reliance upon paradoxical affective responses, and other aesthetic theories of the early-eighteenth century, were not able to sustain the moral side of Kant's philosophical aims – they removed the 'human' from the 'human experience'. The moral law is the desire for freedom which nature both defeats (in the sense of the displeasure) and to which it loses (in the sense of the pleasure of reason overcoming imagination). Thus, whilst experiencing the sublime moment, man is both overcome by nature and overcoming it, and this is the reason why the Kantian sublime is a conflation of both the ethical and aesthetic and why Zammito can argue that, 'The sublime was the aesthetic experience which par excellence symbolised the moral dimension of human existence'.⁶⁰

This is not to say that the Kantian presentation of the sublime is without problems. The sense of *The Critique of Judgement* is difficult to ascertain, given the shifts in thought even within the text itself. Mary McCloskey, for example, points out a number of problems involved in the distinction between the positive pleasure of beauty and the negative pleasure of the sublime, and the 'limited' and 'limitless', which are only 'facilely contrasted' by the separation into qualitative and quantitative judgments.⁶¹ Her most damaging criticism is that the Kantian (dynamical) sublime's form does not *necessarily* frustrate the imagination and excite reason. The only way of resolving this, for McCloskey, is to point to a shift in Kant's use of the imagination:

⁶⁰ Zammito, p. 279.

⁶¹ Mary A. McCloskey, *Kant's Aesthetic* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 97-98.

In fact, in the dynamically sublime we have a case where imagination and understanding must of necessity be working perfectly well together for us to find the scene ‘fearful’. If imagination is still said in such case to be outraged by sublime objects, it must be because ‘imagination’ means something different in this context. Imagination becomes how we picture or think it might be *for us* if the threat of the object seen as fearful were to be realised.⁶²

Thus, the problem of the dynamical sublime is only solved when imagination itself becomes reflective and the dynamical sublime becomes subordinate to the mathematical sublime.⁶³ Arguably, we find that the dynamical sublime itself may be a gesture towards explaining Burke’s arguments on the sublime under a Kantian system, rather than an implicit part of that system itself. This means that the mathematical sublime is the ‘working model’ that must be used for the analogic status between nihilism and the Kantian sublime to be uncovered, if there is such a connection.

Although a number of surface analogies exist between the two concepts, the most important contribution that Kant makes towards a conflation of nihilism and the sublime is in the introduction of a ‘mental’ sublime, where even the ‘limitless’ and the ‘formless’ (called *Das Unform* by Kant) may be perceived as sublime, *provided that they can be demonstrable mental objects*. Earlier in this chapter, we saw the importance of the mental conception of the sublime involving the ‘shapeless mountain’.⁶⁴ This relates to the ‘shapeless’ nature of nothingness that can be perceived as sublime because, as Kant argues, ‘The sublime is found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes, a representation of *limitlessness*, yet with the super-added thought of its totality’.⁶⁵

⁶² McCloskey, p. 100.

⁶³ See McCloskey, p. 101; Kant, §23/244 (p. 90).

⁶⁴ Kant, §26/256 (p. 105).

⁶⁵ Kant, §23/244 (p. 90).

This quotation reveals that nothingness (and, by extension, nihilism) may be considered sublime given the following conditions:

- The *nihil* can be considered an object.
- That this nihilistic object may seem infinite to the senses or imagination.
- That this nihilistic object be grasped as a totality by reason.

If we accept that the *nihil* (as *Das Unform*) may be considered as an object, then it is an object of Reason, that is, something that reason can ‘objectify’. As reason can (and obviously has) made nihilism into a system, it therefore follows that reason has some innate grasp of a sense of nothingness, and thus that the *nihil* may be considered a mental object, in the sense that it is a concept that can interact with others within the mental landscape. The second criterion is covered by the idea that although the ‘expanse’ of nothingness can be judged an object by reason, the imagination cannot necessarily imagine nothingness, and certainly perceives a nihilistic void as infinite in its very lack of anything and everything. The third criterion solidifies this viewpoint because reason may be able to reconstruct a nihilistic void as a totality (it is an ‘infinite void’). This means that a nihilistic sublime is possible within the parameters of the Kantian system, although there are insurmountable problems with actualising such a conflation. This is primarily because there are problems with defining nothingness as an object (it could equally be considered the *absence* of an object) and because, in order for this conjunction to occur, nothingness must be brought into existence through reason (invalid given that nothingness is that which must remain *outside* of a rational framework). This does not mean that a perception of nihilism as the ‘sublime void’ is impossible, however, because that is one of the elements of the sublime feeling within Romantic poetry. Rather, it suggests that a sublime nihilism cannot be conceptualised within

either Burkean or Kantian modulations of the sublime, but only with the extension of these that we see in the Romantic sublime.

The Romantic Sublime

The 'Romantic' sublime is historically quite distinct from the Kantian and Burkean formulations of the sublime although elements of them exist within it. Although the preceding models have applications within Romanticism, they are historically distinct from what might be called the 'Romantic Sublime', as Eva Schaper argues:

Kant's ideas on the sublime have deeply influenced Romantic thought and helped to shape in particular the Romantic conception of imagination. For Kant, though, imagination, in presenting and holding together what sensibility could provide, is unequal to cope with that which cannot be sensed or understood and for which a judgment as to its beauty would be inadequate. Sublimity transcends the bounds of sense and understanding.⁶⁶

This suggests that a Romantic formulation of the sublime would turn Kant away from a noetic sublime towards an empirical sublime, suggesting a return to Burke. However, this is inaccurate as poets such as Wordsworth felt that it is within the nature of humanity that sublimity occurs, an *internal*, not *external*, mechanism. This suggests that the Romantic sublime is (1) man's innate ability to feel sublimity (internal and Kantian) through (2) commune, often solitary, with nature (external and Burkean).

Constructing a Romantic sublime is not that simple, however, and is not merely a synthesis of Burkean and Kantian modes of sublimity. Weiskel's conception of the

⁶⁶ Schaper, p. 384.

‘Romantic sublime’, in de Bolla’s view, is itself anachronistic because it ‘is not to be seen as a continuation or outgrowth of the discourse of the sublime since its functions and situates itself in very different ways’. This is primarily because:

If one were to locate the continuation of the eighteenth-century debate it would be in the social and economic theory of the 1840s where one would find the same obsessions with the interrelations between ethics, aesthetics and rhetoric, and that debate would more likely be understood historically in terms of the discourse of politics, or political economy, than aesthetics.⁶⁷

Rather than being the continuation of the Burkean and Kantian traditions, or even seventeenth- and eighteenth century aesthetic discourse, which were concerned with aesthetics were eighteenth-century versions of ‘political economy’, Weiskel’s formulation of the romantic sublime demonstrates a sharp break with previous formulations. Donougho even goes so far as to suggest that rather than the ‘Romantic sublime’ it should be called ‘the *Yale* sublime’ because the theorists involved in its construction – Thomas Weiskel, Geoffrey Hartman, and Harold Bloom – were actually all twentieth-century Yale critics.⁶⁸

The construction of this Romantic sublime is thus indebted to a number of readings that seem to bear little relation to the experience of sublimity within Romanticism itself. For example, Weiskel proposes a clear opposition between Kantian and Wordsworthian sublimity because Kant’s system is ‘*the aggrandizement of reason at the expense of reality and the imaginative apprehension of reality*’, whereas Wordsworth’s is ‘Bathos, or the art of the profound’.⁶⁹ For Weiskel, the sublime is constructed in two modes, the *metaphorical* and the *metonymical*. The metaphorical sublime is ‘the natural or Kantian’ sublime, a ‘hermeneutic or

⁶⁷ de Bolla, p. 34.

⁶⁸ Donougho, p. 911.

⁶⁹ Weiskel, pp. 41, 20.

“reader’s” sublime in which the ‘absence of determinate meaning’ is resolved by ‘substitution’.⁷⁰ The metonymical sublime occurs when the mind, ‘overwhelmed by meaning’ (imaginative excess), resolves the conflict ‘by displacing its excess of signified into a dimension of contiguity which may be spatial or temporal’, a ‘poet’s’ sublime.⁷¹ Weiskel further opposes these by arguing that the metaphorical sublime is negative because of ‘subreption’ (where the object is mistaken for the cause of sublimity), which is a ‘suppression of the facts, concealment, deception – in short, a cheat’, whereas the metonymical sublime is positive because it is ‘egotistical’ and would eventually ‘subsume all otherness, all possibility of negation’.⁷² In fact, the only way Weiskel can use Kant’s work is for it to be ‘purged of its idealist metaphysics’, suggesting that the Romantic sublime is not a form of transcendental idealism.⁷³

These statements delineate a linguistic turn in constructing the sublime, where sublimity appears in the signification of reality. This is not quite a return to the rhetorical strategies of Longinus, however, because it is concerned with how the sublime breaks through language, and disrupts it, rather than rhetorical strategies for evoking the sublime. The terms ‘metaphorical’ and ‘metonymical’ suggest only a linguistic axis to understanding the sublime, and the further clarifications of this opposition – hermeneutic/egotistical and readerly/poetic – suggest that this is a contest for control of the text between the reader and the author. In contrast, the Kantian sublime is frequently centred on the object in the ‘field of representation’:

⁷⁰ Weiskel, p. 29.

⁷¹ Weiskel, p. 30.

⁷² Weiskel, pp. 46, 49. The use of ‘metaphor’ as a negative representation of the sublime echoes Longinus’ statement that the use of ‘figures’ within rhetoric may be hidden by a well-placed sublime moment: ‘The artifice of the trick is lost to sight in the surrounding brilliance of beauty and grandeur, and it escapes all suspicion’ – Longinus, §17 (p. 26).

⁷³ Weiskel, p. 23.

The Sublime is therefore the paradox of an object which, in the very field of representation, provides a view, in a negative way, of the dimension of what is unrepresentable. It is a unique point in Kant's system, a point at which the fissure, the gap between phenomenon and Thing-in-itself, is abolished in a negative way, because in it the phenomenon's very ability to represent the Thing adequately *is inscribed in the phenomenon itself*.⁷⁴

Žižek's interpretation of Kant argues that sublimity is the failure of the mental object to present itself in language, rather than the failure of language to present the object. Although the Kantian sublime has hitherto been considered noetic and imaginary in opposition to Burke's empirical and natural sublime, according to Weiskel, the Kantian sublime is itself natural in contrast to the Romantic linguistic sublime. Although Kant's sublime is 'negative' in both readings, Weiskel criticises Kant for being noetic, not linguistic.

Of course, Weiskel's conception of sublimity within Romanticism is flawed because it is anachronistic. This is inadvertently indicated by Weiskel when he analyses *The Prelude* and finds within Wordsworth a duality that symbolises two states of mind, one past and one present: 'Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself / And of some other Being'.⁷⁵ Weiskel argues that this 'other Being did not exist in the past; though he now exists there, he is a creation of the present'.⁷⁶ This is indicative of Weiskel's approach to Wordsworth because the linguistic construction of Wordsworth's sublime is itself 'a creation of the present'. Weiskel's formulation of Romantic sublimity is also arguably *anachronistic* (and therefore 'misplaced' as well as anachronistically 'mis-timed') because it 'places' the Wordsworthian sublime within language, rather than in the solitary apprehension of Nature. Instead, it is

⁷⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 203.

⁷⁵ Wordsworth, II. 32 (p. 77).

⁷⁶ Weiskel, p. 170.

possible to see in Wordsworth, and other Romantic poets, an *extension* of the Burkean and Kantian modes of sublimity:

Dizzy Ravine! And when I gaze at thee,
 I seem, as in a trance sublime and strange,
 To muse on my own separate fantasy,
 My own, my human mind, which passively
 Now renders and receives fast influencings,
 Holding an unremitting interchange
 With the clear universe of things around.⁷⁷

Shelley's response to the ravine in 'Mont Blanc' (1816) suggests a mix of Burkean and Kantian sublimities, in which the ravine begins the sublime feelings (a natural Burkean response) but also creates a 'separate fantasy' (a noetic Kantian response). It further suggests ambivalence between the passive Burkean 'reception' of nature and the Kantian 'rendering' of the natural world. However, this passage also suggests an 'unremitting interchange' that, although linguistic (as Weiskel suggests), is sublime because Shelley is both *placed in* the world by nature and also *places* the world in relation to himself. There is no terror in this passage, only solitary commune 'with the clear universe of things around'.

Whilst critics such as Frances Ferguson would emphasise the 'solitary' aspect of this sublimity because 'solitude comes to be cultivated as a space for consciousness in which the individual is not answerable to others', this solitude is actually subordinate to something else, a moment where the 'I' is clearly separated into two distinct identities, the 'I' receiving the

⁷⁷ Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Mont Blanc', in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Alasdair D. F. Macrae (London: Routledge, 1991), II. 34 (p. 31).

images and the 'I' that watches the first consciousness.⁷⁸ This is not, as Weiskel would imply, 'a gap between the imagined self and the Other' but a gap presented within consciousness itself, the Sartrean moment of Being 'for-itself'.⁷⁹ This implies that nature acts as the 'nothingness' present in a Sartrean consciousness and that Romantic images of nature invariably involve the presentation of absence. This explains the distinction within Wordsworth about 'Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself / And of some other Being' in which it is not a past self but his present self that is the 'other Being' being watched, the ineffable moment of trying to catch the 'now'. This further suggests why the search for sublimity always ends in failure:

Remembering how she felt, but what she felt
 Remembering not, retains an obscure sense
 Of possible sublimity, whereto
 With growing faculties she doth aspire,
 With faculties still growing, feeling still
 That whatsoever point they gain, they yet
 Have something to pursue.⁸⁰

Weiskel reads this passage as sublime because 'The energy that ensures continuity is directed towards the possibility (never to be realized) of an adequate signifier, for *what* the soul originally felt has disappeared into the vacancy'.⁸¹ This passage also suggests, however, an internal conflict that is the search for an *individuated cohesion*, the transcendental moment at

⁷⁸ Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 114. Ferguson seems to agree with Weiskel on the temporal aspect of sublimity when he writes that within 'Lyrical Ballads' there is an 'attempt to cancel out the difference between past existence and present existence' (p. 164).

⁷⁹ Weiskel, p. 154.

⁸⁰ Wordsworth, II. 316 (p. 93).

⁸¹ Weiskel, p. 144.

which the 'I' becomes the 'I'. This implies that the sublime is the feeling of frustration that originates in the inability to reconcile two aspects of the self whose difference is not temporal but spatial; a 're-membering' rather than 'remembering' of the self. The reason why 'whatsoever point they gain, they yet / Have something to pursue' is therefore in the inability of humanity to gain access to this individuated cohesion, suggesting that the search for the absolute self becomes an infinite regression, an ouroborotic skirting of absence. The sublime feeling present within Romanticism is therefore the result of a kind of nihilistic vertigo, a dizziness caused by reflection on the absent centre of the self.

This explains the relation between the 'romantic sublime' (in its various forms) and nihilism and why certain critics have observed nihilistic elements in Romantic poetry.⁸² The repeated use of abyssal imagery and the sublime void suggest that absence is central to an understanding of a 'romantic sublime': the 'abyss' has already been seen in most of the poetic passages within this chapter. Weiskel suggests that the appearance of the 'abyss' and the 'void' is predominantly linguistic, in that it is the 'attenuation of the text (signifier) to the zero degree', in which the language of sublimity becomes 'beyond words'. For Weiskel, sublimity marks the moment at which the 'absence of a signified itself assumes the status of a signifier' thereby 'making absence significant', clearly talking about the 'abyss' of language.⁸³ It also suggests, however, that the rhetoric of nihilism – an apocalyptic revolutionary nihilism – was entering into the vocabulary of society at the time. The 'end of things' present in the rhetoric of the English Civil War and the French Revolution clearly had an impact in

⁸² See Wallace G. Kay, 'Blake, Baudelaire, Beckett: The Romantics of Nihilism', *Southern Quarterly: A Journal of the Arts in the South*, 9 (1971), 253-59; Ross Woodman, 'Shelley's "Void Circumference": The Aesthetic of Nihilism', *English Studies in Canada*, 9:3 (1983), 272-93; and David LaChance, 'Naïve and Knowledgeable Nihilism in Byron's Gothic Verse', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 32:4 (1996), 339-68, and 'Nihilism, Love & Genre in *Don Juan*', *Keats-Shelley Review*, 11 (1997), 141-65.

⁸³ Weiskel, pp. 27-28.

creating the sublime moment of the seventeenth century, and it also gave credence to the subsequent rise of nihilism in the eighteenth century.

Although the sublime pre-dates nihilism in terms of its development and discursive shifts, there are parallels with how these terms were used. Both nihilism and the sublime signify a distinct moment in the evolution of the concept of modernity, from the Renaissance, through the Enlightenment, to the present day. Where the sublime started and shifted in emphasis from rhetoric to psychology to rationality, nihilism similarly followed suit, highlighting the shift from religion to secularism (albeit in a negative mode). Where the sublime stands for the celebrative aspect of an ideology, nihilism stands for its demise, the point at which it becomes residual to a 'new' emergent ideology, epitomised by a 'new' sublime. Thus, nihilism can be said to function as a 'time-lag' form of sublimity, in which they both signify a similar concept in two distinct periods. Although they are never equivalent and cannot be conflated at such points, there is a connection between them that comes to fruition under the auspices of postmodernism.

Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern

The fact that both nihilism and the sublime have their origins in the rise of Enlightenment humanism suggests that they are not as distinct as contemporary scholarship often argues. Histories of the Enlightenment and the sublime rarely include nihilism, despite the fact that it is predominantly a product of the Enlightenment. Similarly, histories of nihilism do not associate nihilism with the sublime. Even Gillespie's *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, with its reliance on Descartes and Kant to demonstrate the historical construction of nihilism, shies away from this point. Likewise, critics such as Carr, Löwith and Adorno, whilst observing that there are parallels between nihilism and Enlightenment humanism, fail to recognise the sublime – an integral aspect of Enlightenment humanism – as an integral aspect of nihilism, unless it is as the ideological ‘false consciousness’ by which nihilism comes to be realised.

The reasons for the distinction between nihilism and the sublime are located within the ideology of Enlightenment humanism itself: if rationality was a social good then an anti-social nihilism must be evil. Although nihilism was a fundamentally rational philosophy, it demonstrated the point at which Enlightenment rationality broke down and was dismissed as a ‘*reductio ad absurdum*’ by critics of rationality.¹ Similarly, the condemnation of nihilism by proponents of Enlightenment humanism was not ‘rational’ but ‘a rationale’. If nihilism was truly opposed to Enlightenment ideals, then *a priori* judgements which ‘disproved’ nihilism were possible; instead, critics could only formulate *a posteriori* arguments. The very fact that

¹ See page 17, n. 21 of this thesis.

these were ‘after-the-fact’ arguments demonstrates that nihilism was an unforeseen product of Enlightenment rationality. Despite this, the arguments seem to have worked, and Kant is the point of bifurcation between nihilism and the sublime. Nihilism, for most critics, began when ‘nihilists’ such as Fichte ‘appropriated’ Kant’s transcendental idealism. Such critics neglect the fact that nihilism is implicit to the Enlightenment Project itself. Because of this, Burke and Kant are judged far more kindly than Pisarev and Chernyshevsky, Nietzsche and Heidegger: nihilism is negative and the sublime is positive.

Nihilism came to symbolise a negative perception of a particular philosophy (for example, atheism in relation to a predominantly Christian ideology) where the sublime symbolised the positive perception of the same philosophy (both Burke and Kant can be argued to be atheistic in their reduction of the divine). This reification reached its climax within the twentieth century, when the term ‘nihilism’ became a term of approbation and its usage merely an adjunct to qualify other philosophies. As a result, nihilism is no longer a noun – the ideology of the *nihil* – but an adjective, where something is ‘nihilistic’ if it is disagreeable. Postmodernism and poststructuralism are no different in this respect, for they both attribute a secure meaning to nihilism despite the play of *différance*. Both postmodern and poststructural critics strongly resist being labelled as ‘nihilists’ because of the negative connotations that surround the word. The reverse is true of the sublime, where the postmodern sublime, predicated upon a ‘positive’ conception of the play of *différance*, is always positive. Paul Crowther, for example, whilst writing that ‘If [...] we are to have a theoretically adequate notion of the sublime, we must – in a way Lyotard does not – show some *logical* kinship between its negative and positive components’ is not referring to making

the sublime nihilistic.² He is instead referring to the modes of sublimity observed by critics such as Weiskel, where different forms of sublimity arise as a result of either metaphorical or metonymical feelings. This ‘negative’ sublime is still, in effect, positive. It is merely a different way of finding a positive feeling of the sublime, not a negated sublime, or a nihilistic sublime. Nihilism is anathema to postmodernism, whilst the sublime is its apotheosis.

A Postmodern Enlightenment?

Postmodern critics separate nihilism and the sublime because of the origins of postmodernism, and construct postmodernism in such a way as to reinforce this gap, despite the fact that the origins of postmodernism are themselves debatable. Charles Jencks, for example, locates the advent of postmodernism as 3.32pm on the 15 July 1972, with the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing development in St. Louis.³ This symbolised the destruction of functional modernist architecture and the rise of new architectural forms that embodied a spirit of playfulness. This architectural paradigm is important, but it does omit *the* most important contributing factor to the development of a postmodern sensibility – the Second World War. From the ashes of the massive economic, emotional, and physical devastation of this war, the postmodern phoenix rose. This metaphor suggests not only the ethical turn that postmodernism was to take ‘in the face’ of the Holocaust (the reason for this phrasing will become clear) but also the fact postmodernism is essentially a rebirth, a post-apocalyptic philosophy intended to remedy that which led to the Holocaust –

² Paul Crowther, ‘*Les Immatériaux* and the Postmodern Sublime’, in *Judging Lyotard*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 192-205 (p. 201).

³ See Charles Jencks, *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1991), p.23.

Enlightenment modernity. It also suggests ambivalence, however, in that this symbolises *anamnesis* – a recollection of that which came before – as well as its destruction.⁴ This ambivalence is at the heart of postmodern theory and determines the extent to which nihilism and the sublime merge within postmodernism.

Perceiving postmodernism to be the result of the Holocaust locates its origins in 1945. Although existentialist literature and philosophy also blossomed at this point, postmodernism was to gradually encompass these within its own sphere of discourse. It appropriated some existentialist ideas, such as absurdity, and recast them in its own image. Others it rejected entirely, viewing them as vestiges of an *ancien régime*, such as the postmodern rejection of a subjective mode of being – being based on the Self – towards an intrasubjective one – being based on the Other. This epitomises the (perceived) distinction between postmodernism and Enlightenment modernity, and defines the moment at which postmodernism rejected nihilism as a valid philosophy. For postmodernism, the Second World War and the Holocaust were the products of Enlightenment totalitarianism, for which ‘humanism’ was a misplaced addendum. The ‘humanism’ of Enlightenment humanism was not about being human, but about deposing a tyrannical God and replacing him with an equally tyrannical Man. It was not social emancipation but individual emancipation (as seen in Russian Nihilism), not freedom from superstition but subjection to the laws of Reason. ‘Modernity’, the increasing industrialisation of Western societies, merely enabled this law to be realised. Faster communication and increasing reliance upon technological modes of production abstracted ‘the human’ in a move ‘away from the centre

⁴ David Levin argues in *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation* (London: Routledge, 1988) that postmodernism is nihilistic because it fails to achieve ‘a recollection of Being, of its dimensionality’ (p. 5), although this is flawed inasmuch as postmodernism is about retrieving the positive aspects of the Enlightenment from the Enlightenment Project itself.

towards X'.⁵ Thus, 'Enlightenment modernity' was the abstraction of humanity implicit to Enlightenment rationality and came to symbolise all that led towards the Holocaust, a perception reinforced by critics such as Adorno and Löwith.

Postmodernism therefore distanced itself from Enlightenment modernity and, at the same time, nihilism. However, as Christopher Norris argues, 'Postmodernism only gains its appearance of liberating movement when set against that false image of modern ("enlightened") rationality and truth which presupposes the existence of self-authorizing grounds for the conduct of reasoned debate'.⁶ Postmodernism creates its own version of the Enlightenment in order to demonstrate its own ethical validity. This act of hermeneutic violence suggests a deliberate turn away from what the Enlightenment was saying, towards what postmodernists such as Lyotard wanted it to say, as David Hollinger observes:

The profound tensions within the work of the 1890-1930 generation were relaxed by a new historiography responsive to the hegemonic ambitions of persons who claimed postmodernism as their vehicle. The 1890-1930 historical moment was thus virtually evacuated in order to create a more stark and momentous confrontation between postmodernism and the old Enlightenment of Descartes and Kant.⁷

Like Norris, Hollinger argues that postmodernism deliberately misread the Enlightenment: 'postmodernists appropriated the most exciting of the contributions of the canonical modernists and effaced the movement that produced them'.⁸ Postmodernism can therefore

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. by R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), §1 (p. 8).

⁶ Christopher Norris, *The Truth about Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 231.

⁷ David Hollinger, 'The Enlightenment and the Genealogy of Cultural Conflict in the United States', in *What's Left of Enlightenment?: A Postmodern Question*, ed. by Keith Michael Baker and Peter Hanns Reill (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 7-18 (p. 12).

⁸ Hollinger, p. 12.

only be 'postmodern' through a deliberate rejection of what 'Enlightenment' and 'modernity' mean.

Postmodernism obscures the fact that a definition of the Enlightenment is just as debatable as postmodernism. Securing the heterogeneous nature of postmodernism by interpreting the Enlightenment as homogeneous ignores the *heterogeneous* nature of the Enlightenment: when critics secure one meaning to the Enlightenment, they ignore its 'counter-history'. Hollinger argues that the Enlightenment is actually the parallel movement of two very different tendencies, the first of which is primarily absolutist:

The Enlightenment project denied the constraints and the enabling consequences of history by assigning to human reason the role of building life anew from a slate wiped clean of tradition. This project tyrannized a host of particular cultural initiatives and tried to make everyone alike by advancing universal rules for identifying goodness, justice, and truth. Politically, the Enlightenment promoted absolutist and imperialist initiatives. Above all, the Enlightenment project blinded us to the uncertainties of knowledge by promoting an ideal of absolute scientific certainty.⁹

This is a negative presentation of the Enlightenment, in which it is configured as tyrannical. It is 'blinding' because there is too much light to see anything 'in the dark' (applying as much to a racist, colonial mentality as it does to scientific rationality). Hollinger points another way of reading the Enlightenment, however, which is by no means as negative:

The Enlightenment project brought under devastating scrutiny the prejudices and superstitions that protected slavery and a virtual infinity of other injustices. It created the historical and social scientific inquiries that enable us to speak with such confidence about the social dependence of the self. The Enlightenment promoted religious tolerance against the imperialist ambitions of conflicting absolutisms. Above all, the

⁹ Hollinger, p. 8.

Enlightenment was subversive of traditional political authority, and ultimately it gave us democracy.¹⁰

This is a positive presentation of the Enlightenment, where it is an emancipatory project. By scrutinising received wisdom, the Enlightenment was a subversive act that freed humanity from history and absolutism, rather than being promoting imperialism and tyranny.

How can the Enlightenment be 'above all' both a project of blinding and of scrutinising, of tyranny and subversion, of absolutism and tolerance? Hollinger argues that both interpretations are possible:

The Enlightenment led to Auschwitz, just as it had led to the Terror; or the Enlightenment led to the principles by which we judge the Terror to have been excessive, just as it led to standards by which Auschwitz can be most convincingly condemned today.¹¹

This suggests an 'either/or' cultural interpretation, in which the reader's perception determines a culture's meaning. Although this is indeed valid, it suggests a *hermeneutic* (the interpretation depends upon the reader) rather than *synthetic* (both interpretations are true) interpretation of historical consciousness. The synthetic interpretation can be defined as 'both/and' because any given period is 'both *x* and *y*' rather than 'either *x* or *y*'. Although the synthetic is obviously 'hermeneutic' in the sense that it is a reading, it suggests that duality is

¹⁰ Hollinger, p. 8.

¹¹ Hollinger, p. 9.

the most important aspect of a given ideology.¹² In relation to the Enlightenment project, these two interpretations suggest the conflation of opposing precepts: nihilism (the negative moment) and the sublime (the positive moment).

This paradigm holds true when we compare, as Carr suggests, Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* with Kant's 'Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?'.¹³ Turgenev argues that 'A nihilist is a man who doesn't acknowledge any authorities, who doesn't accept a single principle on faith, no matter how much that principle may be surrounded with respect'.¹⁴ Similarly, Kant argues:

Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason, but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere Aude!* ['Dare to be wise!'] 'Have courage to use your own reason!' – that is the motto of enlightenment.¹⁵

Both contain ideas on reason as being of paramount importance, but where one is a negative depiction of nihilism, the other is a positive depiction of sublimity (Kant's theory of Enlightenment is achieved through adumbrating the sublime within rational Enlightenment discourse). Each, however, connects rebellion against established norms with rational progress. Thus, nihilism and the sublime are intrinsically linked within the Enlightenment

¹² Rather than Raymond Williams' trinary perception of ideological progression (dominant, residual, and emergent ideologies competing within a given historical moment), this suggests that there is a duality within any historical moment where 'progress' is measured in the tension between two opposing ideologies. In fact, this is an extension of Jenck's 'double-coding' across the history of modernity, rather than merely within 'the postmodern turn' – a 'postmodern' Enlightenment. See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 121-27, and Charles Jencks, *What is Postmodernism?* (London: Academy Editions, 1986), p. 7.

¹³ See Karen L. Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth-Century Responses to Meaninglessness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 15, and 148, n. 11.

¹⁴ Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, trans. by Richard Freeborn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 27.

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, 'Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?', in *Kant: Selections*, ed. by Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 462-67 (p. 462).

Project and are entwined with its concerns over power, knowledge, and language. Nihilism reflects the so-called negative reading concerned with the destruction of the old hierarchy – the proposal of rationalism at the expense of the faith, of the human at the expense of the divine. The sublime reflects the positive reading of the Enlightenment using precisely the same points, from the promotion of rational psychology over divine ideology to the rise of scientific positivism, and the proposal of ‘the human’ as the most important element of the world.

This creates a new perception of postmodernism because without either nihilism or the sublime, which are both embedded within the Enlightenment, the postmodern could not have happened. This suggests that postmodernism is both a result of, and response to, the Enlightenment (a synthetic interpretation). Like the Enlightenment, postmodernism is an amalgam of *both* nihilism *and* the sublime, and just as mercurial. This dualism demonstrates both postmodernism’s interpretation of the Enlightenment and the problems suggested by critics such as Hollinger and Norris: postmodernism merely inverts the opposition between nihilism and the sublime. This inversion, or displacement, of nihilism and the sublime occurs throughout history, as the following table illustrates:

Dominant Ideology	Sublime Moment	Nihilistic Moment
Christianity	Divine elevation	Rationality / Humanity
Enlightenment Modernity	Rationality / Humanity	The Divine / Authoritarianism
Postmodernism	Irrationality	Transcendence / Metanarratives

3.1 Nihilistic and Sublime Moments within Ideologies

This suggests that the opposition between nihilism and the sublime functions not only within any historical moment (as two opposing ideologies), but also within certain ‘dominant’ ideologies (as two opposing moments). Christianity proposes a sublime that is reliant upon the idea of divine elevation (Longinus) and labels rationality and humanism as nihilistic (Cortès and Jacobi) because it opposes this. ‘Enlightenment modernity’ proposes a rational or anthropocentric sublime (Kant and Burke) and labels the divine as nihilistic (Nietzsche). Christianity labels the Enlightenment as nihilistic, and vice versa. Postmodernism elevates the irrational as sublime and decries metanarratives and the idea of transcendence as nihilistic, thereby implicating both Christianity and the Enlightenment with nihilism. To answer the question Lyotard (through Kant) asks – ‘what is postmodernism?’ – therefore requires conceptualisation of both nihilism and the sublime. However, postmodernism is not a conflation of these concepts, a synthetic (in Hegelian terms) construction of *thesis* (sublime) and *antithesis* (nihilism), but an ante-bifurcatory form that exists before the division ever arises or in the ‘excluded middle’ between the two. This marks the point at which the postmodern sublime implicates itself with nihilism. Although both Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard differ in their perceptions of postmodernism and its sublimity, both inevitably return, despite their best efforts, to nihilism.

The Sublime Postmodern I: Lyotard and the Unpresentable

Lyotard’s definition of the postmodern sublime is one of the most often quoted sections of his seminal text, *The Postmodern Condition*, in which he argues that unpresentability is one of the mainstays of ‘postmodern art’. This comes from Lyotard’s reading of the Kantian

sublime that, when coupled with his reading of Emmanuel Levinas, gives rise to a definition of the postmodern:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.¹⁶

Here, postmodernism is defined in terms of the sublime, as ‘that which puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself’. To discuss the sublime as merely some component of postmodern thought is to miss the point that the postmodern, in Lyotard’s definition, is itself sublime. The ‘postmodern sublime’ does not refer to a modulation of the sublime, directly comparable to either the Kantian or Burkean modes, but to the fact that the postmodern *is* sublime. This distinction is crucial, for all postmodern artefacts – whether art or theory – must in some way be sublime, else they are no longer postmodern: they are not part of a ‘postmodern sublime’ but the ‘sublime postmodern’.

This conceptualisation of postmodernism explains why Lyotard characterises the postmodern as a break from the modernist hegemony of art. Lyotard uses the term *modern* ‘to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse’.¹⁷ In contrast, he writes that ‘*Post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*)’.¹⁸ Lyotard indicates here the capability of postmodernism to break down the established rules of modernism, in effect, before they are written. Lyotard’s

¹⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1999), p. 81.

¹⁷ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xxiii.

¹⁸ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 81.

postmodernism, whilst historically ‘after’ modernism, is theoretically ‘before’ it. For this reason, Lyotard’s conception of a ‘sublime postmodernism’ mirrors a Kantian modulation of the sublime in which *Das Unform* [the formless] is one of the major aspects of its creation:

In Burke as well as Kant, the sublime emerges when there is no longer a beautiful form. Kant himself said that the feeling of the sublime is the feeling of something *Das Unform*. Formless. The retreat of rules and regulations is the cause of the feeling on the sublime.¹⁹

This ‘retreat of rules and regulations’ causes the sublime and thus where ‘modern’ is to be understood as ‘rules and regulations’, the postmodern is their retreat. Lyotard further qualifies this when he discusses ‘Ideas of Reason’, such as ‘society’, ‘a beginning’, or ‘world’. These are sublime because we have no ‘sensory intuition’ of what they are: ‘an Idea in general has no presentation, and *that is the question of the sublime*’.²⁰ This is a recuperation of the Kantian sublime because it is not the presentation of an object but the imagining of an Idea that brings about a feeling of the sublime.

Lyotard’s interpretation of Kant has been much maligned, due to the special status he gives to unrepresentability. Norris suggests that Lyotard actually ‘disfigures’ the Kantian sublime, in the sense that Lyotard both abuses it and removes its figurative nature.²¹ This is a result, Norris argues, of the textual interpretations of critics such as J. Hillis Miller in which ‘aporias [*sic*]’ within Kant’s work invariably lead towards ‘rhetorical “undecidability” which

¹⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Complexity and the Sublime’, in *Postmodernism: ICA Documents*, 4, collected in *Postmodernism: ICA Documents 4 & 5*, ed. by Lisa Appignanesi (London: Free Association Books, 1986), pp. 10-12 (p. 11).

²⁰ Lyotard, ‘Complexity and the Sublime’, p. 11.

²¹ See Norris, pp. 182-256. This disfiguring occurs throughout the history of the sublime as each age seeks to justify its own perception of the sublime through an act of hermeneutic violence. This similarly occurs in nihilism, where Vattimo writes in ‘Optimistic Nihilism’ (*Common Knowledge*, 1:3 (1992), 37-44) that ‘*Verwindung* also means “distortion”, [...] a distorted acceptance’ (p. 38), and that studies of nihilism always involve a *Verwindung* of a previous formulation of nihilism.

threaten to collapse the entire edifice of Kantian critical thought'.²² Norris contrasts this to Onora O'Neill's interpretation that, although 'revisionist', is primarily positivist: 'O'Neill is more inclined to construe Kant's arguments in the rational-reconstructive mode, that is to say, as capable of justification in terms that respect his philosophical purposes while answering to the best, most accountable standards of current philosophical debate'.²³ Norris, who tends towards O'Neill's arguments, reads Kant in an entirely different manner to Lyotard:

[Kant] viewed [...the sublime] as pointing the way to that realm of 'supersensible' judgements whose rule was not given by cognitive requirements that concepts match up with sensuous institutions, but by the exercise of reason in that higher tribunal where issues of aesthetics could be seen as analogous with issues of ethical conscience.²⁴

Where Lyotard concentrates on *Das Unform*, the Kantian sublime is implicit to the construction of a rational moral code – it is, after all, an 'Enlightenment' sublime. Lyotard conflates two different systems within the postmodern because he removes Enlightenment ethics from the Kantian sublime (leaving only Kantian aesthetics) and replaces them with Levinasian ethics. This appropriation is signalled when Lyotard writes of Barnett Newman, 'It's still sublime in the sense that Burke and Kant described and yet it isn't their sublime any more'.²⁵ Lyotard's intentional use of Levinasian ethics accomplishes two things: firstly, the rejection of metanarrative (i.e. Enlightenment or modern) forms by way of Levinasian ethics

²² Norris, p. 212. Miller's argument appears in *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

²³ Norris, pp. 182, 212. O'Neill's arguments appear in *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

²⁴ Norris, p. 246.

²⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde', trans. by Andrew Benjamin, in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin (London: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 196-211 (p. 199).

and secondly, the proposition of an aesthetic sublimity that is suitable ‘after Auschwitz’ by way of the Kantian *Das Unform*.

This obviously states that the ‘sublime postmodern’ is not directly Kantian and explains the reason why Lyotard’s modulation of the sublime evokes the idea of unrepresentability in relation to itself. Dwight Furrow notes that ‘The Kantian sublime acknowledges the unrepresentable, but substitutes for it a fiction that serves the function of a regulative ideal – the hypothesis of a natural teleology for humankind’. This is rejected by Lyotard who, rather than ‘become nostalgic by invoking the illusion of a redemptive, final end [...] continually makes reference to the impossibility of presenting the unrepresentable by refusing to reconcile the opposing feelings’.²⁶ Kant presents a dialectical, synthetic sublime that is refuted by the Lyotardian sublime, which instead refuses the possibility of synthesis within itself. Lyotard would disagree with Furrow’s reading of Kant, however, as the unabridged version of his discussion of *Das Unform* reveals:

I also have something to say to the questioner who said that the sublime in Kant is always limited and absorbed by the idea of a law-governed universe. In Burke as well as Kant, the sublime emerges when there is no longer a beautiful form. Kant himself said that the feeling of the sublime is the feeling of something *Das Unform*. Formless. The retreat of rules and regulations is the cause of the feeling on the sublime. That’s what I was trying to say with the idea of death. It is also the death of God (I don’t suppose Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe would agree with me, because this is of course exactly Nietzsche’s position).²⁷

Lyotard’s position on Kant is that *Das Unform* is the basis of the Kantian sublime, although this is not entirely the case. Furrow’s argument is persuasive because of the fact that Kant

²⁶ Dwight Furrow, *Against Theory: Continental and Analytic Challenges in Moral Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 180.

²⁷ Lyotard, ‘Complexity and the Sublime’, p. 11.

sees the sublime as a transcendent ideal (why else is he a ‘transcendent idealist’?) and thus, although the Kantian sublime promotes *Das Unform* and the ‘retreat of rules and regulations’, it stops short of undermining itself. Whilst the Kantian sublime is not necessarily a ‘regulative idea’, it does contain ‘a natural teleology’. In contrast, Lyotard’s definition of the postmodern refutes the idea of any natural teleology, as this would eventually become ‘a good form’:

In the resolute refusal to impose finality on any discourse, the integrity of the various phrase regimes and genres is preserved because the encroachments among them are mere analogical borrowings. Ethics may employ narrative, but only for the purposes of demonstrating the limitations of a particular prescription; narrative may employ moral prescriptions, but only to demonstrate the limitations of a literary gambit or claim to historical authenticity..²⁸

Furrow’s summary demonstrates the contingent nature of postmodern discourse – its ‘refusal to impose finality’ applies also to itself. This aspect of postmodernism results from Lyotard’s implicit use of Levinasian ethics, in which *bonne conscience* [good conscience] – read as a Lyotardian ‘good form’ – is essentially ‘unethical’.

Problems exist within this definition of postmodernism. This very coercion to be mindful of the preservation of unrepresentability gives rise to the problem of presentability. This has been observed by several critics of postmodernism and is neatly summed up by Furrow:

Although Lyotard claims that the unity of a final end no longer serves as a ‘guiding thread,’ as it did for Kant, the disunity suggested by the injunction to bear witness to the

²⁸ Furrow, p. 181.

impossibility of presenting the unrepresentable *seems no less a regulative idea* – thus preserving the teleological structure of the Kantian sublime.²⁹ (My emphasis)

Because of the ‘injunction’ to preserve the unrepresentable *as* unrepresentable, Lyotard is issuing a *diktat*. Similarly, when Lyotard writes that ‘Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives’, this may be interpreted as an imperative – ‘Be incredulous towards metanarratives’ – and therefore gives rise to a ‘postmodern’ metanarrative.³⁰ This implies that postmodern reflexivity creates a paradox within postmodernism, where its own ethical stance invalidates it.

These problems occur because Lyotard appends Levinasian ethics to Kantian aesthetics. Levinas’ concept of the Other, brought about by his experiences of the Holocaust, promotes an ethical relationship between Self and Other based upon an intrasubjective, not subjective, mode of Being. Furrow summarises the argument as follows:

If the postmodern is ‘that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself,’ then postmodern justice puts forward within the attempts to present justice – within the forms and institutions justice presently takes – the absolutely Other. In so doing it is not seeking to fulfil an aim, like integrity or particularity, which can be characterised independently of the Other and its claim on us, but is simply responding to the face-to-face confrontation with the Other.³¹

This demonstrates both the Kantian modulation of the sublime (putting forward ‘the unrepresentable in the presentation itself’) and the ethical relation posed by Levinas (‘the face-to-face confrontation with the Other’). Levinasian ethics proposes a new way of looking at

²⁹ Furrow, p. 182.

³⁰ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xxiv.

³¹ Furrow, p. 184.

Being that is not based upon the individual subjectivity but upon the individual's relationship with other individuals (intrasubjectivity).

Levinas dispenses with the ideas of the Cartesian *cogito* and with the Sartrean existentialist 'for-itself' of Being, and instead proposes that Being, as knowledge of oneself, can only arrive after face-to-face contact with an-Other Being. This intrasubjectivity is seen clearly when Levinas argues that the desire 'to know' is always concerned with the incorporation of what is Other into the Self:

Since Hegel, any goal considered alien to the disinterested acquisition of knowledge has been subordinated to the freedom of knowledge as a science (*savoir*); and within this freedom, being itself is from that point understood as *the active affirming of that same being, as the strength and strain of being*.³²

Levinas argues that in order to know something, Being consciously seeks to colonise the Other. Rather than meet the Other, it seeks to use its own terms to 'pigeonhole' the Other into a category. Levinas calls this mode of Being *bonne conscience*, because it has 'good conscience' with itself. Levinas proposes that Being must have *mauvaise conscience* instead; a mode of Being that is based upon the capacity to feel guilty that you exist only because of the Other:

The human is the return to the interiority of non-intentional consciousness, to *mauvaise conscience*, to its capacity to fear injustice more than death, to prefer to suffer than to commit injustice, and to prefer that which justifies being over that which assures it.³³

³² Emmanuel Levinas, 'Ethics as First Philosophy', trans. by Seán Hand and Michael Temple, in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. by Seán Hand, pp. 75-87 (p. 78).

³³ Levinas, 'Ethics as First Philosophy', p. 85.

Mauvaise conscience is a mode of Being that realises it exists only because of the Other, that the diacritic relation between itself and the Other is such that should the Other cease to exist, so will it cease to exist. This arises by the face-to-face relation because the face of the Other brings us to the awareness of who we are and forces us into responsibility towards it. Levinas writes that ‘The face, it is inviolable; these eyes absolutely without protection, the most naked part of the human body, offer, nevertheless, an absolute resistance to possession [...] To see the face is already to hear: “Thou shalt not kill”’.³⁴ It is the reception of that face, the recognition that the Self and Other are not the same, that brings the Self towards an ethical relationship with the Other: we are obliged to the Other for our existence. Guilt is the primary mode of Being in *mauvaise conscience*, guilt because we exist from and for the Other, guilt because we are responsible for the Other’s well-being.³⁵ That this is a response to the events of the Holocaust is clear: if people had feared ‘injustice more than death’ then more would have been saved, and if people had thought about ‘that which justifies being [the Other] over that which assures it [the Self]’ then it may not have occurred at all. Although Levinas does not explicitly represent the Holocaust, his ethics emerge from it, in the only ethical relation he can have with the Holocaust: *mauvaise conscience*.

This is arguably the reason for Levinas’ need to place ethics as the ‘First Philosophy’ and form a mode of Being predicated not upon itself, but upon the existence of the Other.

³⁴ Quoted in Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), p. 63. The original source is Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, trans. by Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 8. Robbins’ description of the Levinasian face also explains why Lyotard ‘dis-figures’ the Kantian sublime, because to ‘figure’ is to ‘lose what is human, to be turned into a statue, to be turned into stone’ (p. 50) and therefore, ‘To figure a face is to de-face it’ (p. 57).

³⁵ It is useful to compare Martin Jay and Levin here. In *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century Western Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), Jay calls this ‘facial’ ethic the ‘ethics of blindness’ (p. 543), and characterises postmodernism as ‘ethical’ in a Levinasian sense. In contrast, Levin calls for ‘the opening of vision’ to combat postmodernism (p. 8). Although Levin argues that ‘we are beholden to others, beholden to the being of others, for a vision of our own identity’ (p. 260), he does not refer to Levinas and so sees postmodernism nihilistically.

Whereas philosophy since Plato was ‘the disinterested acquisition of knowledge’, Levinas proposed that ethics replace ontology as the primary mode of philosophy:

This is the question of the meaning of being: not the ontology of the understanding of that extraordinary verb, but the ethics of its justice. The question *par excellence* or the question of philosophy. Not ‘Why being rather than nothing?’, but how being justifies itself.³⁶

This means that philosophy must now deal with the question of ‘how to be’ not ‘why we are’. The previous mode of Being – the nihilistic destruction of the Other to assure the Self, the diacritic definition of the Self against nothing rather than an-Other self – led to the nihilistic excess of the Holocaust.³⁷ Levinasian ethics proposes a move towards the Other in which Being accepts that the Other is different and must remain so.

This Levinasian ethic is transferable to Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism: the postmodern obsession with unrepresentability is a product of this ethical response towards that which is Other. The postmodern, in its desire to avoid categorisation, addresses this concern of proposing ‘forms’ and ‘regulations’ in order to avoid affirming itself at the expense of the Other. Its demand to respect unrepresentability is an ethical demand from the face of the Other and its ‘knowledge’ is concerned with preserving the representational ‘gap’ – what is contingent as opposed to what is absolute. However, whilst the ‘sublime postmodern’ opposes itself to Enlightenment nihilism, and proposes an ethical turn towards *Das Unform*, this turn is already implicated with nihilism because the interrelation between

³⁶ Levinas, ‘Ethics as First Philosophy’, p. 86.

³⁷ This juxtaposition is seen clearly in Paul Auster’s *The Invention of Solitude* (New York: Penguin, 1982) where, upon going to visit the attic in which Anne Frank spent most of the war, Auster observes ‘the rear window of a house in which Descartes once lived’ (p. 83).

nihilism and the sublime that exists within the Enlightenment cannot be so easily dismissed. Lyotard may wish to escape from nihilism, but it haunts the postmodern nevertheless.

Nihilism and the Lyotardian Sublime

For all Lyotard's attempts to dismiss nihilism from the 'sublime postmodern', postmodernism demonstrates a distinctive familiarity with what might be termed its 'nihilistic' root and a propensity to dismiss this in favour of 'the sublime'. One of the primary indicators of this is the way in which each of Lyotard's statements about the sublime always refer back to nihilism in some way. Not only are there such statements as '*Das Unform*' to consider in the light of nihilism (the Kantian sublime as Nietzsche's 'death of God') but also the fact that each time Lyotard encounters nihilism or the sublime the other tends to appear, with Lyotard generally choosing to perceive the sublime as more important than nihilism. In discussing the postmodern destruction of history, for example, Lyotard notes both the Nietzschean and Kantian interpretations to such an approach:

Modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the 'lack of reality' of reality, together with the invention of other realities.

What does this 'lack of reality' signify if one tries to free it from a narrowly historicized interpretation? The phrase is of course akin to what Nietzsche calls nihilism. But I see a much earlier modulation of Nietzschean perspectivism in the Kantian theme of the sublime. I think in particular that it is in the aesthetic of the sublime that modern art (including literature) finds its impetus and the logic of the avant-garde finds its axioms.³⁸

³⁸ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 77. This also signifies the 'postmodern' formulation of nihilism presented by this thesis, in that it 'tries to free' nihilism 'from a narrowly historicized interpretation', which is itself both sublime and nihilistic, whilst paradoxically remaining within a historical postmodern framework.

Lyotard argues that the contemporary always rejects the formulations of the past (as both how the past is formulated and those ‘past’ formulations) and explains how the ‘postmodern’ differs from the ‘modern’. Lyotard explicitly links this to ‘the Kantian theme of the sublime’ because postmodernism derives itself from the Kantian sublime at the expense of nihilism. In fact, he rejects Nietzsche and nihilism by arguing that Nietzsche derived nihilism from the Kantian sublime. This is also, however, Lyotard’s rejection of German idealism, which ‘in particular subsumed’ Longinus’ sublime ‘under the principle that all thought and reality forms a system’.³⁹ Lyotard compares Fichte and Hegel with Kant and Burke, thus implying that whilst Fichte and Hegel ‘*in particular* subsumed’ the sublime, *so too* did Kant and Burke: the difference is only one of degree. This explains how Lyotardian postmodernism continues to use the sublime without feeling that it is in any way implicated with nihilism.

It could be inferred from this that postmodernism and nihilism actually have little in common and that it is merely an anachronistic reading or a historical quirk of fate that nihilism and the sublime seem to reach their *apogee* in Lyotard’s ‘sublime postmodern’. However, it is the concept of unrepresentability at the heart of Lyotard’s definition of the postmodern that suggests its relation to nihilism. Lyotard’s desire to be ethical towards the unrepresentable (the conjunction of Kant and Levinas) leads to a particular formulation of the role of absence within the postmodern. In the postmodern, as Renée van de Vall notes, ‘a special place is designated to silence’. She continues:

Where traditionally philosophy has regarded silence as lacunae, uncharted territory that should be mapped with concepts, reasonings and conclusions, Lyotard is very reticent. He is aware of the fact that charting a philosophical white spot is often the first stage of

³⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Newman: The Instant’, trans. by David Macy, in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin, pp. 240-249 (p. 245).

conceptual colonisation. [...] Silence indicates inevitable gaps in our comprehension, gaps that should be respected, rather than bridged.⁴⁰

Lyotard constructs silence as something that is Other to discourse, although in order to remain ethical towards this representational gap he must remain silent about silence. John Cage is an example of this form of sublimity because of works such as *4' 33"*, which is four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence. In fact, it is not only silence that suggests the unrepresentable, but *any* formulation of absence, as Lyotard also observes a similar thread within abstract painting:

The current of abstract painting has its source, from 1912, in this requirement for indirect and all but ungraspable allusion to the invisible in the visible. The sublime, and not the beautiful, is the sentiment called forth by these works.⁴¹

Thus, 'silence' and 'invisibility' are similar within Lyotard's conception of the sublime. Both silence and invisibility suggest the absence of representation, where silence is the absence of representative language, and invisibility is the absence of representative symbols. This form of Lyotardian sublimity appears in the works of, for example, Yves Klein, Robert Ryman, Robert Rauschenberg, Ad Reinhardt, and Mark Rothko.

Many of the paintings of these artists, like Cage's 'music', are sublime in a similar manner to Barnett Newman's works, which force the reader to confront terror because of the sheer blankness – the presence of absence – thrust upon them. When discussing Newman's paintings, Lyotard defines this moment of terror:

⁴⁰ Renée van de Vall, 'Silent Visions: Lyotard on the Sublime', *Art & Design Profile*, 40 (1995), 68-75 (p. 69).

⁴¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 126.

One feels that it is possible that soon nothing more will take place. What is sublime is the feeling that something will happen, despite everything, within this threatening void, that something will take 'place' and will announce that everything is not over. That place is mere 'here', the most minimal occurrence.⁴²

The form of the 'zip' in Newman's paintings, such as *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-1951), suggests a mode of being (Being?) under pressure, a thin strip, or 'zip', of presence hemmed in by a larger space of absence: 'For Newman, creation is not an act performed by someone; it is what happens (this) in the midst of the indeterminate'.⁴³ The artist and his audience have a tenuous sense of being in a field of indeterminate relations. The sublime moment – the point at which the self reasserts itself – occurs when 'The work rises up (*se dresser*) in an instant, the flash of the instant strikes it like a minimal command: *Be*'.⁴⁴ This is why, as van de Vall observes, 'The sublime feeling is the feeling not of what happens, but that anything happens at all'.⁴⁵ This is not the moment of 'Here', 'Now', 'I am', and 'This is', but the moment – the 'instant' – in which this occurs:

So we must suggest that there is a state of mind which is a prey to 'presence' (a presence which in no way present in the sense of *here-and-now*, i.e. like what is designated by the deictics of presentation), a mindless state of mind, which is required of mind not for matter to be perceived or conceived, given or grasped, but so that there be something.⁴⁶

Lyotard argues that this is not a re-vivification of the self because 'this instant in turn cannot be counted, since in order to count this time, even the time of an instant, the mind must be

⁴² Lyotard, 'Newman: The Instant', p. 245.

⁴³ Lyotard, 'Newman: The Instant', p. 243.

⁴⁴ Lyotard, 'Newman: The Instant', p. 249.

⁴⁵ van de Vall, p. 71.

⁴⁶ Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p. 140.

active'.⁴⁷ The mind thus 'exists' in the sublime state that is 'a mindless state of mind', it is the 'Now' in which the 'I' is not: 'the picture presents the presentation, being offers itself up in the here and now'.⁴⁸ This is the moment, in Levinasian terms, of the *il y a* [there is], the moment which is 'the disappearance of all objects' and 'the extinction of the subject'.⁴⁹ As Jill Robbins summarises, quoting Levinas, 'the *il y a* is a nocturnal space, a space of horror, "the event of being that returns at the heart of negation", "a return of presence in absence"'.⁵⁰

This sublime is nihilistic in the sense that Lyotard describes the white painting, presumably of Rauschenberg, as 'representing nothing (unless it be that there is some unrepresentable)' and his description of the terror that causes the sublime as 'the feeling that nothing might happen: the nothingness now'.⁵¹ Depictions of nothingness create a sublime feeling, although this could equally provoke the moment of the 'I am' – a re-vivification of the self – rather than of the I-less (and eyeless, because it is the point at which the mind is blind) instant. Similarly, there are problems with the depictions of nothingness in Cage, Rauschenberg, Ryman, Reinhardt, Rothko, and Klein. They may be considered sublimely nihilistic but for the fact that *they are not dealing with nothingness*. Reinhardt, Ryman, Rothko, and Rauschenberg do not paint monochromes (as 'one-colour'), but white-on-white or black-on-black. Even Klein's monochromes do not reflect nothingness because he writes that 'Having rejected nothingness, I discovered the Void', the void in question being represented by 'Klein blue'.⁵² These paintings are not 'nothing', but something. Like Cage's '4' 33", they are actually concerned with *performativity*. Cage writes: "There is no such thing as

⁴⁷ Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p. 140.

⁴⁸ Lyotard, 'Newman: The Instant', p. 244.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Robbins, p. 92. The original source is Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), p. 67.

⁵⁰ Robbins, p. 92. Quotations are from Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, pp. 61, 65.

⁵¹ Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p. 121; Lyotard, 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde', p. 198.

⁵² Quoted in Matthew Collings, *This is Modern Art* (London: Seven Dials, 2000), p. 170.

an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot'.⁵³ This means that although the work itself seems blank, it is actually different depending upon its relative performance. Each piece of art will differ in performance, whether it is in the way in which it is lit within an exhibition or the noises in the ambient environment, such as shuffling and coughing. These works demonstrate a performative aspect that is not sublime 'nihilistically', except inasmuch as they are dependent upon absencing themselves and focusing the audience's attention on their immediate environment.

The issue of nihilism also arises in conjunction with the Levinasian roots of the 'sublime postmodern'. The desire for an ethical relation to the face of the Other, in the *mauvaise conscience* of Being, is 'to prefer that which justifies being over that which assures it'.⁵⁴ Although Levinas uses these terms specifically, it must be realised that on a broader palette, the ultimate justification for Being (existence) is non-Being (non-existence). Being cannot exist in isolation, and must be defined diacritically by what it is not – in Levinas' terms this is the face-to-face relation of man to the Other – and, to allow an awkward phrasing, being is not non-being. Non-being does not assure being, but destabilises it, forces it to justify its own existence – why is it? Sartre writes that '*nothingness haunts being*' because 'nothingness, *which is not*, can only have a borrowed existence, and it gets its being from being [...] *Non-being exists only on the surface of being*'.⁵⁵ Martin Jay notes that Levinas disliked 'Sartre's reduction of alterity to nothingness and his belief in the totalising project of the self'.⁵⁶ However, nihilism is not a 'reduction of alterity to nothingness' but the presentation of nothingness as alterity – it is an

⁵³ John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978), p. 8.

⁵⁴ Levinas, 'Ethics as First Philosophy', p. 85.

⁵⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 16.

⁵⁶ Jay, p 557, n. 61.

ideological use of nothingness. Nihilism is founded upon the presence of absence, nothingness brought ‘into being’ (whether linguistically or noetically). As a being, it can therefore exist as ‘otherwise than being’ because it is the existent trace of non-being that is always Other to humanity.⁵⁷ Indeed, as Jay notes, ‘Levinas’ project may, in fact, be characterised *grosso modo*, as the vindication of the “meontological” (from *meon*, nonbeing), ethical impulse that has been buried under the ontological preoccupation of the dominant Western tradition’.⁵⁸ The concern of Levinasian ethics is not only with the previous non-existence of ethics (the rejection of an earlier ‘ethical nihilism’), but also with the meontological over the ontological, where non-being is that which defines being (in the sense that ethics is the ‘first philosophy’, prior to epistemology) – in fact, where that which previously ‘was not’ now ‘is’. This suggests that the core of Levinasian philosophy is the recuperation of that which was previously made nothing, a solution to nihilism.

This recuperation is unethical, however, in Levinasian terms, because it ignores the ‘face’ of nihilism, just as the ideological formulation of nihilism is unethical because the action of bringing nothingness into being (through nihilism) totalises nothingness and ignores its ‘face’: nihilism is that which remains absent and cannot be brought ‘into being’. Although nihilism does not possess a physical face, this does not preclude it from being understood as possessing the same ethical demand as Levinas ascribes to the face. The face of the Other is itself ‘figured’ in Levinas’ works, which is why Robbins asks:

⁵⁷ See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1999).

⁵⁸ Jay, p. 555.

What is the reader to make of the obvious metaphoricity of ‘The face is a hand, an open hand,’ or, ‘The whole body – a hand or a curve of the shoulder – can express as a face’, which even suggest a transfer between synecdochic figures for the human?⁵⁹

To avoid this figuring, one must remain silent, allowing the Other to present its face. Nihilism, which is the absence of the face, does ‘face’ us, however, because it is something that we must face (although not necessarily overcome, as Nietzsche or Heidegger would argue) without bringing it into presence. Ann Smock notes that both Maurice Blanchot and Levinas show a ‘concern for being’s effacement itself: concern, precisely, *lest* it show, lest it be robbed of that indefiniteness, that seclusion, that *foreignness* from which it is inseparable’.⁶⁰ The action of bringing absence into presence is, for Levinas, unethical: that is why the Holocaust remains so conspicuously absent in the majority of his works. It is in fact possible to characterise the Holocaust as ‘those Others made absent by the total concretisation of presence’, which suggests that the Holocaust is an absent face to which Levinas addresses himself. However, this also means that that in his concern for ‘being’, otherwise or not, Levinas is himself being unethical – showing *bonne conscience* – towards eradicating nothingness: he is ignoring the (absent) face of nihilism.

The Sublime Postmodern II: Baudrillard and the Hyperreal

The works of Baudrillard suggest another possibility in the creation of a ‘nihilistic sublime’. Baudrillard’s work on the sublime is passive (compared to Lyotard’s active use of the

⁵⁹ Robbins, p. xxiv. The original quotations are from Emmanuel Levinas, ‘The Paradox of Morality’, trans. by Andrew Benjamin and Tamra Wright, in *The Provocation of Levinas*, ed. by Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 168-180 (p. 169); and Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 212.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Jay, p. 554. The original source is Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 8.

sublime), in which he notes within postmodernism certain characteristics that resemble the sublime. Baudrillard's work is not about the sublime, as is Lyotard's, but is rather concerned with the condition of postmodernity: it is the way in which he reads this that defines postmodernism's sublimity. There is therefore a difference between Lyotard's 'postmodern' and Baudrillard's 'postmodernity'. 'Postmodernity' is a response to economic conditions within capitalism. Baudrillard follows both Fredric Jameson's and David Harvey's perceptions of postmodernism, as 'the cultural dominant of the logic of late capitalism' and the 'dynamism of capitalism's historical-geographical development', respectively.⁶¹ Harvey's concept of 'overaccumulation' is essentially a moment of capitalism in which 'idle capital and idle labour supply could exist side by side with no apparent way in which to bring these idle resources together to accomplish socially useful tasks'.⁶² In such phases, which recur periodically, 'we can expect the turn to aesthetics and to the forces of culture as both explanations and *loci* of active struggle to be particularly acute'.⁶³ Baudrillard differs from Jameson and Harvey, however, because he emphasises the technological, rather than economic, aspects of postmodernism. For Baudrillard, the rise of instantaneous communications gives rise to a postmodern 'hyperreality'.

Baudrillard's conception of postmodernity is a realm of signification that contains no meaning other than as a ghostly feedback signal that perpetuates itself. He writes that, 'From today, the only real cultural practice, that of the masses, ours (there is no longer a difference), is a manipulative, aleatory practice, a labyrinthine practice of signs, and one that

⁶¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 45.

⁶² David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), p. 180.

⁶³ Harvey, p. 327.

no longer has any meaning'.⁶⁴ There is no more information, that assemblage of data that produces meaning, but only a self-referential cycle of raw data that can only produce more data: 'Thus all messages in the media function in a similar fashion: neither information nor communication, but referendum, perpetual test, circular response, verification of the code'.⁶⁵ This 'verification of the code' serves no function other than to ensure its own existence. For Baudrillard, postmodernity is centred upon the idea that the real no longer exists or, rather, that the real no longer contains any measure of reality. What has replaced the real is its *simulacrum*, a 'false' real that is now more real than reality itself: 'The real does not efface itself in favor of the imaginary; it effaces itself in favor of the more real than real: the hyperreal. The truer than true: this is simulation'.⁶⁶

Simulation arises from the Enlightenment desire to attribute Reason as the measure of all things, to quantify and control by scientifically replicating the Real under laboratory conditions. It evolves as a result of this gradual construction of the Real, as defined by Baudrillard's 'orders of the image':

It is the reflection of a profound reality;
 It masks and denatures a profound reality;
 It masks the *absence* of a profound reality;
 It has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 65.

⁶⁵ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p.75.

⁶⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, trans. by Philip Beitchman and W. G. J. Neisluchowski (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990), p. 11.

⁶⁷ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 6.

These four stages mark the demise of the Real and the rise of the simulation, in a rough chronological order. One possible inference from this is that there was at one stage a 'Real', and it is in the subsequent attempts to categorise and define this 'Real' that the onset of simulation began.⁶⁸ Although this is arguably the product of any kind of organised human endeavour since the rise of *homo sapiens* and cosmological mythology, it is useful to consider that the real onset of this was when humanity began to have some measure of success at replicating this 'Real': the Enlightenment. Although the Renaissance sparked a renewed interest in knowledge, the effects of a predominantly religious environment and a profoundly superstitious populace hampered rationality. The rise of printing and literacy gradually brought about a profound shift in the possibility of sharing knowledge across national and cultural boundaries, with a concomitant rise in the number of participants interested in such a debate – as communications became faster, the progress of simulation accelerated proportionally, which eventually gave rise to the Enlightenment Project. The Enlightenment is actually the 'Empire of the Real', inasmuch as it establishes empirical conditions for the production, and verification, of the Real.

The first stage, the 'reflection of a profound reality', arises out of the artistic notion of realism and the scientifically rational construction of mathematical order. These attempt to measure reality in terms of its representation, whether in the use of art that reflects what is 'real' (this definition of course changes according to the perceptions of the artist), or in the rise of mathematics and science to accurately reflect the 'real' world, offering precise explanations for natural phenomena according to a set of internally consistent rules. This, in turn, creates the situation whereby this 'measure of reality' becomes more important than

⁶⁸ It would also be equally valid to see the 'Real' as that which exists before language. As such an 'order' obviously cannot be written – even as 'Real' – without bringing it into language, this explains why it is the absent first term of Baudrillard's 'orders of the image'.

reality itself, the second stage in which the image ‘masks and denatures a profound reality’. This stage is analogous to the debates surrounding realism in the world of art (questions such as ‘why is one piece of art more realistic than another?’ or ‘whose art is realistic and whose is not?’) and in the scientific debates concerned with providing workable hypotheses based upon experimental data in which these hypotheses are tested against each other. It reveals an increasing interest in comparison between formulations of the Real, rather than in the Real itself. Artists have their artworks and scientists have their data, and there is thus no longer need to refer to the Real to establish whether the art or data is an accurate reflection or not. In terms of the sublime, the question became no longer whether a mountain was sublime or not, but whether it was Burke or Kant that gave the most accurate depiction of *how* it was sublime: the mountain itself no longer mattered.

By slowly ceasing to compare the image against the Real, and instead comparing images, this gave rise to the third stage in which the image ‘masks the *absence* of a profound reality’. No longer caring about the Real, scientists and artists debated endlessly about what was real, not realising that the Real no longer existed anywhere but in their formulations of it. Debates about what was real were so intense that nobody realised that the image had replaced the Real (the *signifier* replacing the *signified* as the producer of meaning) and was taking its place. This is seen clearly in René Magritte’s *The Treason of Images* (1928-1929), where people mistake a picture of a signifying image of the pipe for the signified pipe itself – there is no paradox involved in the painting, only in our perception of it.

The final stage in the ‘orders of the image’, the ‘postmodern condition’ according to Baudrillard, is the stage at which we now find ourselves. At this stage, the image ‘has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum’. This leap comes about by the production of the image that no longer has to maintain the illusion of reality: the image

has completely usurped the Real and need only refer to all the other fourth-order images in order to maintain its cohesion. Rather than being connected in any way to the Real, the image and all its associated images combine to form a closed network of interconnections that are the only reality we know. They exist as a matrix of pure simulation from which we no longer have any access to the Real, but merely a series of self-replicating, reflexive images that contain the sum of human existence, with no ‘reality’ whatsoever. The simulacrum is ‘never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference’ and thus, as a result, the postmodern is not about emancipation but about control; it is no longer real, but *hyperreal*.⁶⁹ This is seen clearly in both the Wachowski Brothers’ *The Matrix* (1999) and Michael Pattman’s *Virtual Nightmare* (2000), where ‘virtuality’ replaces reality.

Baudrillard’s Marxist roots become clear at this point because he assesses the impact of this simulacral image upon ideological control, saying that ‘All the powers, all the institutions speak of themselves through denial, in order to attempt, by simulating death, to escape their real death throes’.⁷⁰ This means that all ‘opposition’ has been co-opted into this matrix of images, not actually opposing each other, but serving as buttresses to each other’s existence:

The status of all negativity in the West: political oppositions, the ‘Left’, critical discourse, etc. – a simulacral contrast through which power attempts to break the vicious circle of its own nonexistence, of its fundamental irresponsibility, of its ‘suspension’. Power floats like money, like language, like theory.⁷¹

This is not a dream out of science fiction: everywhere it is a question of doubling the process of work. And of a doubling of the process of going on strike – striking

⁶⁹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 6.

⁷⁰ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 19.

⁷¹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 24.

incorporated just as obsolescence is in objects, just as crisis is in production. So, there is no longer striking, nor work, but both simultaneously.⁷²

Baudrillard's reading of the postmodern differs significantly from Lyotard's in that it is not an *escape* from Enlightenment rationality but the ultimate *culmination* of it. We see this nowhere more clearly than in his tirade against Reason, which gives rise to the reading that the orders of the image are a product of the Enlightenment:

What is essential is that nothing escape the empire of meaning, the sharing of meaning. Certainly, behind all that, nothing speaks to us, neither the mad, nor the dead, nor children, nor savages, and fundamentally we know nothing of them, but what is essential is that Reason save face, and that everything escape silence [...] In a world bent on doing nothing but speak, in a world assembled under the hegemony of signs of discourse, their silence weighs more and more heavily on our organisation of meaning.⁷³

The 'empire of meaning' and the importance 'that Reason save face, and that everything escape silence' directly contrasts with the Lyotardian conception of the postmodern as essentially an ethical stance towards the silent Other. It is thus possible to argue, given that Lyotard's stance on the postmodern is so closely allied to the Kantian conception of the sublime, that Baudrillard has little, if anything to do with the sublime. This, however, is not the case. Crowther, for example, sees in the Baudrillardian hyperreal a sense of Kant's idea of *excess*:

The boundaries between self and world are dissolved in the 'play' of signs and representations. We have an excess of images and signs. [...] It is sublime in the Kantian

⁷² Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 27.

⁷³ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 137.

sense. The sensory and imaginative excess can be comprehended as an idea. It revivifies our capacity for rational insight – our very ability to create and discover meaning.⁷⁴

Crowther's reading of Baudrillard argues that the hyperreal is sublime because of its status as something that exceeds the boundaries of the self. It can be comprehended only through 'our capacity for rational insight'. Thus, for Crowther, the hyperreal is sublime precisely because we can somehow imagine the existence of this hyperreal: a concept exists that allows us to grasp something that is essentially out of our reach, a concept that is itself *excessive*.

Crowther's argument centres upon the idea that we can discover meaning in the hyperreal – that which resists all meaning. Baudrillard's sublime does not stem from the production of meaning, however, because it is the very denial of meaning implicit in the hyperreal that creates the sublime feeling. Baudrillard, rather than talking about the 'production of meaning', argues that 'production' – the economy of signification – has overtaken 'meaning', thus leaving the phrase 'production of meaning' obsolete; in the fourth-order network of images, there is only 'production'. Although Baudrillard's dealings with the notion of excess are indeed sublime, it is more accurate to say that the Kantian sublime observed in Baudrillard has very little connection to the world of meaning and much more to do with its lack. It is a perfect example of '*Das Unform*' because the hyperreal is 'a liquidation of all referentials'.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Paul Crowther, 'The Postmodern Sublime: Installation and Assemblage Art', *Art & Design Profile*, 40 (1995), 8-17 (p. 11).

⁷⁵ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 2.

Nihilism and the Baudrillardian Sublime

Baudrillard discusses nihilism in relation to the hyperreal in the last chapter of *Simulacra and Simulation*, in which he refutes any connection between the hyperreal and nihilism. He even refutes the possibility of nihilism itself, saying ‘in fact, nihilism is impossible because it is still a desperate but determined theory, an imaginary of the end, a weltanschauung [world-view, life-philosophy] of catastrophe’.⁷⁶ Discussing Baudrillard’s Marxist roots, however, Anthony King writes that ‘In the context of this postmodern order, he has renounced all critique and, instead, opted for nihilism’.⁷⁷ King argues that Baudrillard’s rejection of critical referral (the idea that critics can comment upon and alter the ‘real world’ by observation and argument) and subsequent turn towards an internalised ouroborotic technique (refuting the meaning and intentions of academic discourse within the framework of academic discourse), gives rise to nihilism. This is what Norris has termed ‘Baudrillard’s style of puckish nihilist abandon’.⁷⁸ It is nihilistic because the critical referral towards an external ‘reality’ or ‘hyperreality’ marks the rise of a second-order image, in which ‘An excrescent system of interpretation develops with no relations to its object’: the nature of academic discourse, ‘the dialectical stage, the critical stage’ is ‘empty’.⁷⁹

Although King is correct in his interpretation of Baudrillard’s nihilism, his justification for Baudrillard’s ‘admission’ of nihilism is tenuous. He cites Baudrillard’s ‘confession’: ‘I am a terrorist and nihilist in theory as the others are with their weapons. Theoretical violence,

⁷⁶ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 161.

⁷⁷ Anthony King, ‘Baudrillard’s Nihilism and the End of Theory’, *Telos*, 112 (1998), 89-106 (p. 89).

⁷⁸ Norris, p. 6.

⁷⁹ King, p. 96; Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 161.

not truth, is the only resource left us'.⁸⁰ However, King neglects to inform the reader of the conditional phrasing of this 'admission':

If being a nihilist is carrying, to the unbearable limit of hegemonic systems, this radical trait of derision and violence, this challenge that the system is summoned to answer through its own death, *then* I am a nihilist in theory as the others are with their weapons. Theoretical violence, not truth, is the only resource left us.⁸¹ (My emphasis)

If nihilism is the radical destruction of the inherited social order (as with the Russian Nihilists) *then* Baudrillard is a nihilist. Baudrillard would disagree with this because, after he has made his alleged confession of nihilism, he writes, 'such a sentiment is utopian. Because it would be beautiful to be a nihilist, if there were still radicality – as it would be nice to be a terrorist, if death, including that of the terrorist, still had meaning'.⁸² This inability to be terroristic – the untenability of nihilism – also appears when he discusses the 'Beauborg Effect': 'Nothing. The void that would have signified the disappearance of any culture of meaning and aesthetic sentiment. But this is still too romantic and destructive, this void would still have had value as a masterpiece of anticulture'.⁸³ Baudrillard rejects any possibility of summoning the system 'to its own death' because of 'simulacral doubling' in the orders of the image. Baudrillard writes that 'The imaginary of Disneyland is neither true nor false, it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp', meaning that Disneyland only exists to make the 'real world' look serious, and that the 'real world' only exists to make Disneyland look 'fun'.⁸⁴ This reciprocal relationship, this 'doubling of the process of work', transfers to academic discourse, which only exists in order

⁸⁰ King, p. 97.

⁸¹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 163.

⁸² Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 163.

⁸³ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 164.

⁸⁴ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 13.

to justify the hegemonic regime of culture, which in turn only exists to justify the existence of academic discourse – we are essentially trapped in the hegemonic ideology of simulation.⁸⁵

Having said this, Baudrillard *is* a nihilist, although not in the manner that King ascribes to him. Where King argues that Baudrillard is a nihilist because he is a terrorist, it is actually because he is not. Where King writes that, ‘Through the infuriating bewilderment the later texts [of Baudrillard] cause them, those readers will be driven to oppose hyperreality itself’, it is through the ‘infuriating bewilderment’ that they will come to understand that they cannot oppose hyperreality.⁸⁶ Where King dismisses Baudrillard’s terrorism as ‘self-delusion’ because it ‘halts the dialectical process at its first and most inadequate initial point’, this is precisely the reason why Baudrillard is not a terrorist and cannot be read as such.⁸⁷ King misunderstands Baudrillard, even though he is right to call Baudrillard a nihilist. Baudrillard is a nihilist by *not* explaining hyperreality, by *not* conforming to academic syllogisms to create meaning, by *not* creating a dialectical argument. Rather, Baudrillard realises the futility of discussing concepts such as ‘nihilism’ and ‘the hyperreal’ within academic discourse *by the act of discussing them*, suggesting that it is through its performance that the hyperreal comes to be recognised. Baudrillard recycles his own argument to come back upon itself:

The Gordian knot can at least be cut. The Möbius strip, if one divides it, results in a supplementary spiral without the reversibility of structures being resolved (here the reversible continuity of hypotheses). Hell of simulation, which is no longer one of torture, but of the subtle, maleficent, elusive twist of meaning.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 27.

⁸⁶ King, p. 97

⁸⁷ King, p. 101.

⁸⁸ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, pp. 17-18.

Where critics expect to be able to cut Baudrillard's argument, all they get is the 'subtle, maleficent, elusive twist of meaning' of the Möbius strip. The nihilism of Baudrillard is nowhere more apparent than in this cyclicism:

Hypersimilitude was equivalent to murder of the original, and thus to a pure non-meaning. Any classification of signification, any modality of meaning can thus be destroyed simply by logically being elevated to the n th power – pushed to the limit, it is as if all truth swallowed its own criteria of truth as one 'swallows one's birth certificate' and lost all of its meaning.⁸⁹

Simulacra and Simulation is not a dissertation on the hyperreal, but a hyperreal artefact itself. By pushing the concept of the hyperreal to its n th power, Baudrillard effectively destroys it of any meaning. It is the very act of discussing Baudrillard's within the framework of academic discourse that recreates the hyperreal and this is why Baudrillard ends *Simulacra and Simulation* on the note of seduction: 'This is where seduction begins'.⁹⁰ By discussing the hyperreal within 'critical theory' it is precisely at this point that the hyperreal begins: we have been seduced by Baudrillard into justifying the concept's existence, incorporating it within a self-referential academic frame of signs which is henceforth to be known (ironically) as 'the hyperreal'. The only solution to this is to not discuss it and head towards the absent presence of a text that by its very absence reinforces the 'doubling of work' by its non-inclusion, again leading towards 'the hyperreal'. This is comparable to Nietzsche's definition of nihilism – '*the highest values devalue themselves*'.⁹¹ Just as the rationality of the Enlightenment produces the 'orders of the image' that destroy it, so too Baudrillard subverts his own concept of the hyperreal, and causes academia to subvert itself.

⁸⁹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 108.

⁹⁰ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 164.

⁹¹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §2 (p. 9).

It is in *this* sense that Baudrillard is nihilistic and thus that the sublime observed is indeed a nihilistic sublime. Baudrillard, when discussing binary oppositions, theorises what the opposite of a ‘remainder’ may be, and in so doing arrives at a blank point: ‘One can say the right/the left, the same/the other, the majority/the minority, the crazy/the normal, etc. — but the remainder/ ? Nothing on the other side of the slash’.⁹² In the remainder, the origins of a truly nihilistic sublime become clear. It seems that nothing is opposed to the remainder (in both senses of ‘nothing’) and yet this blank space, this ‘remainder of the remainder’, is nihilistic:

And yet, what is on the other side of the remainder exists, it is even the marked term, the powerful moment, the privileged element in this strangely asymmetrical opposition, in this structure that is not one. But this marked term has no name. It is anonymous, it is unstable and without definition. Positive, but only the negative gives it the force of reality. In a strict sense, it cannot be defined except as the remainder of the remainder.⁹³

There is no opposite of the remainder, but only the remainder itself. No longer is it a case of everything *versus* nothing (belief *versus* nihilism) but the remainder *versus* nothing, the structure without structure, an ‘anonymous’, ‘unstable’ term with ‘no name’ that is ‘without definition’: nothingness. The genius of Baudrillard’s thesis in *Simulacra and Simulation* thus resides in the fact that nihilism is itself an untenable position and that Baudrillard cannot be a nihilist. However, it is precisely because Baudrillard’s nihilistic position is untenable that it is nihilistic: it is a position he cannot take and yet does, and in taking the position, it means he cannot. Baudrillard’s argument itself becomes the reflexive paradox, the knot that cannot be cut, part of the formulation of what is a ‘postmodern nihilism’.

⁹² Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 143.

⁹³ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 143.

4.

Postmodern Nihilism

So far, this thesis has excavated the link between the historical development of nihilism and the sublime in order to establish how these two concepts interact within postmodernism. There are other elements vital to formulating ‘postmodern nihilism’, however. Although these still revolve around the play between nihilism and the sublime, the focus here is upon the way in which these appear throughout recent critical and literary theory, and the impact this has on understanding the ideological function of postmodern nihilism. The two most significant theories in this debate are poststructuralism and postmodernism – those literary theories/philosophies most commonly associated with late-twentieth-century nihilism. Nihilism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism are frequently confused, primarily because of the way in which they each construct truth. The aletheologies connected with postmodernism and poststructuralism – relativism and pluralism – reject the idea of absolute truth and so, to many critics, postmodernism and poststructuralism must be nihilistic. Although both reject the idea of absolute truth, the manner in which this rejection occurs differs from nihilism and thus postmodernism and poststructuralism are ‘nihilistic’ only in certain senses of the term, not generically.

Rather than being nihilistic themselves, both postmodernism and poststructuralism affect how nihilism is constructed. Seen in this way, postmodern nihilism can be understood in much the same way as Jeffrey Nealon constructs postmodernism in *Double Reading*. For Nealon, deconstruction affects how postmodernism is constructed and hence *Double*

Reading's subtitle: 'postmodernism after deconstruction'. In relation to nihilism, the construction of a postmodern nihilism is therefore conditioned by both poststructuralism and postmodernism: nihilism *after* 'postmodernism after deconstruction'. This creates a postmodern formulation of nihilism that is as indebted to deconstructive practice as it is to the 'sublime postmodern'. Postmodern nihilism marks the point at which nihilism becomes reflexive, deconstructing its own axioms, and is thus equally a 'deconstructive' or 'reflexive' nihilism. Furthermore, this demonstrates an extension, rather than invalidation, of the interpretations of nihilism made by Nietzsche and Heidegger, where their 'readings' of nihilism are deconstructed when located within (as opposed to outside) nihilism.

Such a formulation of nihilism is inadvertently epitomised by Eugene O'Neill in *A Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956), when the character of Edmund desires a place in which, 'Everything looked and sounded unreal. Nothing was what it is'. He continues, 'That's what I wanted – to be alone with myself in a world where the truth is untrue and life can hide from itself'.¹ This suggests nihilism (and especially postmodern nihilism) in a number of ways. 'Nothing was what it is' suggests not only that nihilism is nothingness but also that its self-identity is invalidated; 'to be alone with myself' suggests a dual, almost Sartrean, consciousness within nihilism; and 'life can hide from itself' suggests the Heideggerian moment in which the being of nihilism (an)nihilates its own being. Finally, the phrase 'truth is untrue' indicates a point of convergence between aletheology and nihilism because nihilism is predicated upon the rejection of truth. Although it implies a formulation of nihilism that is itself untrue (a 'postmodern' nihilism), it shows how nihilism's rejection of the truth differs from the rejection of truth seen in relativism and pluralism.

¹ Eugene O'Neill, *A Long Day's Journey into Night* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990), IV (p. 113).

‘Truth is untrue’: Nihilism, Relativism, and Pluralism

The importance of relativism and pluralism to twentieth-century theory cannot be overemphasised. Although relativism and pluralism existed before the twentieth century, they became important at that point for two reasons. To some, they were part of the progress of nihilism in which the (moral) truth was devalued; to others, they were the remedy to moral absolutism (i.e. nihilism), which is the postmodern or poststructuralist perception of relativism and pluralism. This is again implicated with the Holocaust. Where the former perspective argues that the Holocaust occurred because of the rise of relativism and pluralism (there was no absolute moral authority to prevent it), the latter argues that their ascent was not until *after* the Holocaust, due to the subsequent rejection of authoritarianism and totalitarianism. Gene Blocker argues that ‘Always in the history of philosophy unity, permanence, eternity, completeness and rationality are grouped together and opposed to multiplicity, change, sensuous desire and the temporal, partial, and defective’, although there is a partial shift within the twentieth century from negative interpretations of relativism and pluralism (indicated by ‘defective’) towards more positive readings in which ‘permanence, eternity, completeness and rationality’ become negative.²

Relativism and pluralism can both be defined by Tony Jackson’s succinct summary of relativism: ‘What matters most about relativistic thinking, especially in the context of poststructuralism, is that it always admits, one way or another, the paradoxical truth that there is no absolute truth’.³ This understanding of the truth – ‘there is no absolute truth’ – determines both relativism and pluralism, and the distinction between them is subtle. Relativism argues that truth is relative because although truth exists, it is relative to your

² Gene Blocker, *The Meaning of Meaninglessness* (Belgium: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), p. 54.

³ Tony Jackson, ‘Nihilism, Relativism, and Literary Theory’, *SubStance*, 24:3 (78) (1995), 29-48 (p. 30).

position. One 'truth' is contingent upon its relationship to all other appearances of truth (both spatial and temporal). Pluralism is an extension of relativism where all truths are equally valid and applicable *even if they are mutually exclusive*. This raises the issue of 'incommensurability', which states that certain forms of the truth cannot be directly compared because there is no common frame of reference. Whereas relativism states that there is no need to compare formulations of the truth (they are all relatively true), pluralism states that all forms of truth are equally true but that some do not fit together: they are incommensurable.

Relativism and pluralism can be illustrated with a fence painted white on one side and black on the other. Observer *A* might say that the fence is white (if he is stood on that side) and be *relatively* but not *absolutely* true. To observer *B*, on the other side of the fence, there is no way of gauging the accuracy of this statement. He could (relatively) truthfully say that *A* is lying because the fence is (relatively) black. To understand the 'nature' of the fence, *A* and *B* both have to trust that the other is telling the truth. The *différend* [dispute, conflict, dissension] emerges when *A* and *B* disagree because although both are true, their arguments are incommensurable: one uses 'white' to define his argument while the other uses 'black'. Pluralism, in contrast to relativism, is observer *C* who is sitting on the fence (a traditional poststructural or postmodern position): to him the fence is both black and white and both *A* and *B* are true. In *absolute* truth, only *C* is true; in *relative* and *pluralist* truth, all are true. The difference between 'relative' and 'pluralist' emerges from their 'relative' positions: relativism is based upon a relative *microcosmic* position of *A* and *B*, and relies upon trust to understand

the macrocosm. Pluralism exists ‘above’ both A and B , and calls them both true: it is *macrocosmic*.⁴

This explains why relativism and pluralism are often used synonymously in relation to poststructuralism and postmodernism, and why Jackson’s definition of relativism applies to pluralism also. Although postmodernism is most commonly associated with pluralism and poststructuralism with relativism, such boundaries are fluid because they at no point involve a movement away from the localised, or equivalent, truth-processes that postmodernism and poststructuralism generate. This also explains why both poststructuralism and postmodernism have been called nihilistic: they have devalued the concept of absolute truth. This is inaccurate because ‘To argue that it is absolutely true that there is no absolute truth is not to argue that there is absolutely no truth’.⁵ If both relativism and pluralism deny any form of absolute truth, and if nihilism is the absolute denial of truth, then nihilism cannot be equated with either relativism or pluralism. The difference is between relativism and pluralism arguing ‘there is no *absolute* truth’, and nihilism arguing that ‘there is *absolutely* no truth’: relativism and pluralism both claim that there is some form of truth possible, whilst nihilism claims that there is no such thing as truth. In relation to our metaphysical fence, a nihilist would claim that all the observers are ‘untrue’ because the fence is not ‘black’, ‘white’, or ‘black and white’. This originates in the comparison between relative truths – nihilism uses A to disprove B and C , B to disprove A and C , and C to disprove A and B – and therefore implies that nihilism is actually a form of misplaced relativism. Likewise, it is diametrically opposed to pluralism in the sense that, where pluralism claims that ‘absolutely

⁴ The use of ‘macrocosmic’ could be inferred to mean a metanarrative, although what this actually means is that all microcosmic truths are placed *at the same level* within a macrocosmic structure. It is therefore not the application of one macrocosmic truth to validate or invalidate microcosmic truths (metadiscourse) but the elevation of all microcosmic truths to a macrocosmic level (a ‘sphere of discourse’).

⁵ Jackson, p. 37.

everything is true', nihilism claims that 'absolutely nothing is true'. In fact, extreme formulations of nihilism would argue that the fence did not exist at all.

This relation between nihilism, relativism, and pluralism is clear in Goudsblom's definition of the 'nihilist problematic', in which pluralism gives rise to nihilism:

The co-existence of truths only becomes problematic when one is prepared to compare and assess them as equals. Then the arguments *pro* and *contra* assume a new cogency, with the possible result that one begins to doubt the validity of claims of *any* of the parties.⁶

This places nihilism within a realm of choice: having looked at the truths on offer in society, a nihilist then proceeds to reject all of them, for each have an equal weighting. Thus, pluralism and relativism – the 'co-existence of truths' – lead to nihilism, although it is only a possibility:

The nihilist problematic is within many people's reach. To those who have lost track of the truth amid a multiplicity of options it is a command to reject all current truths; to others it offers a liberation from the prevailing norms and a rationale for exercising this option. It can lead to despair or tranquillity, to tragic faith or laconic disbelief.⁷

Nihilists have 'lost track of the truth amid a multiplicity of options'. This formulation of nihilism (in relation to pluralism) argues that it is the inability to find truth, a *lack* of truth. In comparison, Blocker argues that nihilism and meaninglessness originate in the *rejection* of truth, seen in his discussion of the difference between 'projective' and 'non-projective' meaning:

⁶ Johan Goudsblom, *Nihilism and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 92.

⁷ Goudsblom, p. 142.

There is nothing tragic simply in the realisation that meaning is projection; this becomes tragic only where it means, as it does for many of us in the 20th century, that meaning is *not nonprojective*. It is only by contrast with the supposed *ideal* of nonprojective meaning that the realisation that meaning is a form of projection has the tragic consequences it has for many people today. Without this ideal, meaninglessness would simply be the realisation that the meaningful world of everyday experience is an interpreted world, a human accomplishment. Without the nonprojective ideal of meaning, this is what *constitutes* a meaningful world, not what *denies* meaning to that world.⁸

Blocker argues that truth is what we make it and that this is in no way a bad thing. He implies, like Nietzsche, that nihilism comes about because of not accepting that meaning is projected onto the world.⁹ This search for a ‘hard core of nonprojected meaning underlying the deceitful world of ordinary appearances’ results in the conclusion that ‘the world is thoroughly meaningless’, that is, nihilism’s search for absolute truth rejects any possibility for relative or pluralist truths.¹⁰

Like Goudsblom and Blocker, Jackson also argues that nihilism is a misplaced formulation of the truth, although in his argument, as ‘relativism miscomprehended’. This is because of the ‘leap’ between the ‘Platonic solidity’ of truth and a ‘nihilistic nothingness’ that is a result of relativism but is not a ‘logically necessary conclusion’. He argues that ‘wherever the leap occurs, it reveals an inadequate understanding of the meaning of relativism: we may in fact define nihilism as relativism miscomprehended in this specific way’.¹¹ Unlike Goudsblom, and like Blocker, Jackson argues that nihilism functions as a ‘rejection’ of truth, rather than as a ‘lack’ of truth:

⁸ Blocker, p. xiii.

⁹ Blocker would disagree with this interpretation of Nietzsche, because he sees Nietzsche as ‘obviously contradictory’. The difference stems from the fact that Blocker claims that Nietzsche ‘concluded that knowledge was a meaningless illusion’ whereas Nietzsche actually celebrated the illusory nature of meaning (see Blocker, pp. 82-83 and page 30 of this thesis).

¹⁰ Blocker, p. 91.

¹¹ Jackson, p. 37.

The truth in general could only be evaluated as a lie if there were somewhere some realm of true truth (i.e. Platonic truth) in relation to which the truth that we live with could be found to be false. Falsehood can only be determined, pragmatically, in relation to some specific realm of operative truth.¹²

Nihilism can only function as a kind of generic falsehood that can only be determined in relation to some realm of truth. These three critics all implicate nihilism with a search for truth that is frustrated and argue that nihilism is either miscomprehension or ignorance of relativist and pluralist theories of truth.

There is more to the relationship between nihilism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism than merely aletheology, however, because it is the ways in which postmodernism and poststructuralism reject truth that determine their nihilistic tendencies. For example, humanist critics reject the textuality of postmodernism and poststructuralism, religious critics reject their secularity, and social-reform critics reject their ‘theoreticality’ and political conservatism – for these critics, therefore, both postmodernism and poststructuralism are nihilistic. Although these criticisms are accurate in the loosest possible sense (nihilism as the negation of an existing ideology), in specific ways they are misleading. In order to formulate a ‘postmodern nihilism’, it is vital to uncover the ways in which nihilism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism interact at a local level, rather than merely generalising nihilism to such an extent that any philosophy could be considered nihilistic.

¹² Jackson, p. 34.

‘Nothing was what it is’: Nihilism and Poststructuralism

Analyses of poststructuralism were (and are) dominated by its relationship to nihilism. Those theorists who disapprove of poststructuralism frequently call it nihilistic whereas those theorists who support poststructuralism argue that it is not nihilistic, and that it is in fact those structural biases within other theories that are in fact nihilistic. Nihilism is always negative in such readings, and what is in question is merely its application, not its characteristics. The relationship between nihilism and poststructuralism is often seen in relation to debates over nihilism, relativism, and pluralism as, for example, in Norris’ rejection of poststructuralism, which is worth quoting in full:

And indeed, for all its talk of self-reflexivity and textual *mise-en-abîme*, post-structuralism is clearly caught on the horns of a familiar relativist dilemma when advancing its more assertive claims as regards the obsolescence of truth-values, the demise of enlightened (‘meta-narrative’) discourse, the illusion of referentiality, etc. At the very least there is an element of self-disabling paradox – a performative contradiction – involved in these sweeping pronouncements that affect to underline the veridical status of any such utterance, their own (presumably) included. Of course this line of counter-argument has long been used against sceptics and relativists of various persuasions, from Socrates *versus* Protagoras to the current debate around canny rhetoricians like Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish. And the latter have always bounced back – as now – with some version of the standard knock-down response: that ‘truth’ is nothing more than a language game, the cultural ‘form of life’, the interpretative framework or conceptual schema which happens to prevail at some particular time and place. In this sense one could argue that the new textualism is just an updated version of old relativism, with the difference that it goes more elaborate ways around – or adopts more sophisticated strategies of textual deconstruction – in order to make its otherwise familiar point.¹³

Norris argues that whilst poststructuralism thinks it is arguing about ‘self-reflexivity and textual *mise-en-abîme*’, it is actually returning to an ‘otherwise familiar point’ of relativism and falling upon the same hurdles. The association of poststructuralism with relativism suggests nihilism because of the ‘self-disabling paradox’ and ‘performative contradiction’ implicit

¹³ Christopher Norris, *The Truth about Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 198-99.

within poststructural discourse – how can it write that there is no possibility of meaning and hope to be understood?

It is not simply a matter of *pro* and *contra*, however, because there are also debates about the appropriation of deconstruction – what might be called the practical aspect of poststructuralism. Nealon, for example, argues that what critics frequently perceive to be deconstruction is not Derrida's definition of deconstruction at all, but rather the institutionalised literary criticism of Yale critics such as Paul de Man and Miller.¹⁴ There is therefore not only a distinction between deconstruction (praxis) and poststructuralism (theory), but between 'deconstruction as literary criticism' and 'deconstruction as philosophy'. This is seen when Nealon writes 'Gasché attacks and subverts this practice of deconstructive literary criticism in *defense* of deconstruction [...] – in defence of Derrida's thought against those who (ab)use it by turning it into an unproblematic, nihilistic *method* for reading literary texts'.¹⁵ Deconstruction, as philosophy, suggests a way of thinking that problematises itself, and if we allow this distinction, then we must also allow that within deconstructive philosophy there will be very different interpretations.¹⁶

Without resorting to a detailed examination of deconstruction, it is worth examining a few key points in the debate. Deconstruction, in its simplest incarnation, is a method of thinking about the construction of meaning through language. It attempts to reveal those structures that create meaning that are implicit in the structure of the text and inherent within language. To argue that deconstruction is nihilistic is not necessarily incorrect, although the current terms in the debate need to be reviewed: what is meant by

¹⁴ This is essentially a summary of the second chapter of Jeffrey Nealon's *Double Reading: Postmodernism after Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 22-49.

¹⁵ Nealon, p. 24.

¹⁶ See Nealon, p.27.

‘deconstruction’ and ‘nihilism’? Those signifiers that are taken to be stable must be deconstructed themselves before we can understand the connections between nihilism and deconstruction because deconstruction, like nihilism, is a problematic term in its own right.

A working definition of deconstruction within literary studies would be the practice of reading a text according to poststructuralist principles. As such, deconstruction often stands accused of reducing a text to nothingness, and is more frequently interpreted as being ‘destruction’ than ‘de-construction’. Meyer Abrams argues that poststructural theory recreates the text as ‘a vertical and lateral reverberation from sign to sign of ghostly nonpresence emanating from no voice, intended by no one, referring to nothing, bombinating in a void’.¹⁷ He argues that deconstructive practice reduces all texts to nothingness, because deconstruction first creates everything as text and then de-textualises itself. This, for Abrams, is a totalising nothingness because all texts become identical under a deconstructive reading. Other critics have also perceived a nihilistic threat to literature within deconstructive practice. René Wellek, for example, argues that deconstruction is the new nihilism, destroying any potential for literature:

No self, no author, no coherent work, no relation to reality, no correct interpretation, no distinction between art and nonart, fictional and expository writing, no value judgment, and finally no truth, but only nothingness – these are negations that destroy literary studies.¹⁸

These statements reveal the extent to which poststructuralism is associated with the destruction of a literary text and therefore nihilistic. It is perceived to replace the text with a

¹⁷ M. H. Abrams, ‘The Deconstructive Angel’, *Critical Inquiry*, 3 (1977), 425-38 (p. 431).

¹⁸ René Wellek, ‘The New Nihilism in Literary Studies’, in *Aesthetics and the Literature of Ideas: Essays in Honor of A. Owen Aldridge*, ed. by François Jost and Melvin J. Friedman (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990), pp. 77-85 (p. 80).

void, meaning that all texts are essentially the same. As a result of this, 'text' becomes meaningless and deconstruction becomes the literary study which destroys all literary studies. Wellek continues his analysis of deconstruction with the damning indictment that, of all literary theories, 'Only deconstruction is entirely negative'.¹⁹

Abrams and Wellek both agree that deconstructive reading reduces the quality of the text, removing the author, the reader, historical circumstance, and eventually the text itself. Their criticisms stem from an understanding of deconstruction that is entirely negative: by neutralising all the binary oppositions in the language of a text, the text is absented from itself. This process is repeated across all texts, and so literature, as the totality of all texts, is reduced to nothingness. Conversely, the other side of the critical divide argues that this perception of deconstruction is deeply flawed, because rather than deconstruction being about the destruction of the text, it is about determining those metaphysical 'centres' of the text and decentering them. Mark Wigley argues:

Deconstruction is [...] understood as an affirmative appropriation of structures that identifies structural flaws, cracks in the construction that have been systematically disguised, not in order to collapse those structures but, on the contrary, to demonstrate the extent to which the structures depend on both these flaws and the way in which they are disguised.²⁰

To Wigley, deconstruction is not 'entirely negative' but an 'affirmative appropriation'. Jonathan Culler's interpretation of poststructuralism is similarly affirmative: deconstruction reveals 'a chromatic plenitude, a playing of all possible notes in all possible registers, a

¹⁹ Wellek, p. 83.

²⁰ Mark Wigley, 'The Domestication of the House: Deconstruction after Architecture', in *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture*, ed. by Peter Brunette and David Wells, pp. 203-27 (p. 207).

saturation of space' that is characterised by a sense of play, not destruction.²¹ Thus, arguments concerning the 'nihilism' of deconstruction seem to revolve around the extent to which deconstruction is seen to negate existing methodologies – it is only nihilistic if you believe in that methodology.

One of the most important elements of deconstruction is play. This 'play' is the 'play of the signifier' through what Derrida calls *différance*, which implies both difference (signifiers gaining meaning in their difference from other signifiers) and deferral (signification acting as a chain, along which meaning is forever deferred). Roland Barthes defines this play as part of the '*infinity* of the signifier':

The *infinity* of the signifier refers not to some idea of the ineffable (the unnameable signified) but to that of a *playing*; the generation of the perpetual signifier (after the fashion of a perpetual calendar) in the field of the text (better, of which the text is the field) is realized not according to an organic process of maturation or a hermeneutic course of deepening investigation, but, rather, according to a serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations.²²

This definition of play is a positive perception of deconstruction, in which play is the most important element of a text. The 'perpetual signifier' does not arise either from an 'organic process of maturation', where meaning becomes clearer as the reader moves through the text (a syntagmatic reading), or from 'a hermeneutic course of deepening investigation', where meaning becomes clearer in relation to close reading of certain parts of the text (a paradigmatic reading). Instead, it emerges from the play between these readings, in the 'serial

²¹ Jonathan Culler, 'Prolegomena to a Theory of Reading', in *The Reader in the Text*, ed. by Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 46-66 (p. 47).

²² Roland Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 158.

movement of disconnections' where reading is continually frustrated and meaning forever deferred. This is *jouissance*, the pleasure of reading that comes from the difficulty of the text.

Not everybody agrees with this perception of play. To some, the poststructuralist interpretation of *différance* suggests that there is no meaning, and that it is therefore nihilistic. Derrida writes in 'Living On: *Borderlines*' that 'A text is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces'.²³ This differential network seems to recreate the world as a text, supported by Derrida's famous *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte* [there is nothing outside of the text].²⁴ This has frequently been interpreted as suggesting a 'prison-house of language' in which language defines everything, a form of consciousness in which language creates the world around us. This is because in much the same way as Lyotard writes that words 'are always older than thoughts', Derrida writes that we 'think only in signs'.²⁵ This suggests, to some critics, an invalidation of 'reality': 'The doctrine of the 'prison-house of language' is manifestly absurd. It would reduce literature to a play of words with no meaning for people and society: it would relegate it to a musty corner of the intellectual universe'.²⁶ It is primarily for this reason that Derrida has been labelled a nihilist.

²³ Jacques Derrida, 'Living On: *Borderlines*', in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. by Harold Bloom, pp. 75-176 (p. 83).

²⁴ See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 163.

²⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 142; Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 50.

²⁶ Wellek, p. 78.

It is ironic that Derrida has been labelled as such despite his insistence that ‘Play is always play of absence and presence’.²⁷ Poststructuralism is not concerned with absence, but with the interrelation and play *between* absence and presence. Miller interprets this as the fact that ‘Deconstruction is neither nihilism [absence] nor metaphysics [presence] but simply interpretation as such, the untangling of the inherence of metaphysics in nihilism and of nihilism in metaphysics by way of the close reading of texts’.²⁸ Carr observes that this suggests ‘that the deconstructive critic operates from some privileged place, outside of either nihilism or metaphysics, calmly pointing out the parasitic relationship between the two’.²⁹ She allows Miller to ‘write back’ and clarify his earlier statement: ‘Deconstruction does not provide an escape from nihilism, nor from metaphysics, nor from their uncanny inherence in one another. There is no escape. It does, however, move back and forth within this inherence’.³⁰ This is seen where Derrida writes that he tries to keep himself ‘at the limit of philosophical discourse’, although he does ‘not believe that someday it will be possible to simply escape metaphysics’.³¹ Carr alleges, in response to this, that Miller plays ‘with the terms in a dizzying and confusing fashion’ because he argues that ‘these are two names for essentially the same thing – human thought’.³² This suggests that, contrary to Carr’s hypothesis, nihilism is anything but banal.

In fact, deconstruction reveals the intricate connections between nihilism and the sublime, seen nowhere more clearly than when Derrida himself discusses ‘play’. Derrida

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 292.

²⁸ J. Hillis Miller, ‘Critic as Host’, in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. by Harold Bloom and others (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), pp. 217-53 (p. 230).

²⁹ Karen L. Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth-Century Responses to Meaninglessness* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 107.

³⁰ Miller, ‘Critic as Host’, p. 231. Quoted in Carr, p. 107.

³¹ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 6, 17.

³² Carr, p. 107.

characterises play positively, although his use of Nietzsche is indeed suggestive of nihilism to some:

We must *affirm* this, in the sense which Nietzsche puts affirmation into play, in a certain laughter and a certain step of the dance.³³

Turned towards the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediacy is therefore the saddened, negative, nostalgic, Rousseauistic side of the thinking whose other side would be the Nietzschean affirmation, that is the joyous affirmation of play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin.³⁴

This celebration suggests that poststructuralism is not nihilistic because it accepts, and celebrates, the projective nature of meaning. This is relativism, not nihilism, and as such realises the performativity of its own axioms. This also reveals that deconstructive play is sublime, where rather than being the ‘saddened, negative, nostalgic’ search for nonprojective meaning, it is the ‘joyous affirmation’ of projective meaning. Whereas Nietzsche argues that this affirmation is ‘my *Dionysian* world of the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying’, implying a tendency towards conflict, Derridan play suggests ‘the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin’.³⁵ Rather than propose a cycle of birth and death, of becoming, Being, then unbecoming, Derrida proposes a world (of signification) in which it is only ever becoming, and never reaches the stage of being at which conflict would start.

³³ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 27.

³⁴ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 292.

³⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), §1067 (p. 550).

The relationship between nihilism and metaphysics that deconstruction excavates suggests John Boly's interpretation of the 'reductive' moment in phenomenology. Boly defines this in Husserlian terms, the *eidetic* phase in which 'phenomena are released, so far as this is possible, into a pre-reflective and pre-conceptual mode, as pure perceptions still awaiting the activity of mediation' and the *transcendental* phase, which 'select[s] and arrange[s] a potentially infinite semantic potential into actual meanings'.³⁶ Reduction functions in Boly's argument as the 'continuous interplay between energy and order, dynamism and system', as control and entropy within the semantic system. Boly argues that without the transcendental phase, 'the eidetic phase would become incoherent and lapse into speechless nihilism'.³⁷ This is relevant to deconstruction because Boly feels that Derrida proposes the eidetic at the expense of the transcendental; Derrida 'reacts to any formal, organizing structure as if it were *ipso facto* a closed system'. This results in 'a sterile dualism, characteristic of deconstruction, between anarchy and tyranny, randomness and determinism'.³⁸ Boly argues that, in the desire for a completely open system, Derrida absolutises phenomenology and tends towards the 'speechless nihilism' of the purely eidetic phase. However, Derrida argues that one cannot escape metaphysics, thereby realising the impossibility of a purely eidetic phase: if, as we have seen, we can only 'think in signs', then any human understanding of a pre-conceptual phase is obviously impossible. This suggests rather that Boly's opposition (*via* Husserl) between the eidetic and transcendental is exactly that moment which deconstruction seeks to find in the opposition between nihilism (the eidetic) and metaphysics (the transcendental).

If Derrida accepts that deconstruction is finally part of the metaphysical/nihilistic opposition, then this implies that deconstruction is indeed nihilistic because it seeks to

³⁶ John R. Boly, 'Nihilism Aside: Derrida's Debate over Intentional Models', *Philosophy and Literature*, 9:2 (1985), 152-65 (p. 153).

³⁷ Boly, p. 153.

³⁸ Boly, p. 154.

subvert the metaphysical system. This would be a misreading, however, because there is a doubling-back within deconstruction:

Deconstruction cannot limit itself or proceed immediately to a neutralization: it must, by means of a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, practice an *overturning* of the classical opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system. It is only on this condition that deconstruction will provide itself the means with which to *intervene* in the field of oppositions that it criticizes, which is also a field of non-discursive forces.³⁹

Deconstruction can only neutralise the text as the first part of the deconstructive process: it must always be followed by ‘a general *displacement* of the system’. Most critics of deconstruction omit this second stage in their critiques of deconstruction, thereby omitting its very purpose. The first phase is often argued to be the raising of the ‘traditionally denigrated pole of whatever opposition is under consideration’ whilst the second phase is the reinscription of this opposition ‘within the field of an “undecidable” third term, one which usually retains the old, denigrated name (e.g. “writing”), thereby remaining within the terms of the opposition yet warding off every attempt to read it as a simple dialectical sublation of the two’.⁴⁰ This suggests that deconstruction can indeed mediate between metaphysics and nihilism without being nihilistic, although the impossibility of figuring the ‘undecidable’ third term in this mediation suggests a point at which deconstructive practice invariably undoes itself. Derrida writes that ‘Truth, unveiling, illumination are no longer decided in the appropriation of the truth of being, but are cast into its bottomless abyss as non-truth, veiling, and dissimulation’.⁴¹ Here, deconstruction deconstructs itself, as Norris

³⁹ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 329.

⁴⁰ Stephen Adam Schwartz, ‘The Deconstructive Imperative’, *Modern Language Notes*, 105:4 (1990), 857-74 (pp. 861-62).

⁴¹ Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. by Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 119.

has suggested, because it cannot 'truly' say that the truth is not true. This is similar to the ambiguous moment that Heidegger observes within nihilism:

'Nihilism' remains ambiguous, and seen in terms of two extremes, always has first of all a double meaning, inasmuch as, on the one hand it designates the mere devaluing of the highest values up to now, but on the other hand it also means at the same time the unconditional countermovement to devaluing.⁴²

The attempt to overcome nihilism is still nihilism, just as deconstructive theory, when applied to the opposition of metaphysics/nihilism, must deconstruct itself as both the devaluing and the 'unconditional countermovement' to devaluing. This suggests that deconstruction is itself the undecidable third term within the opposition between metaphysics and nihilism, and suggests that the relationship between poststructuralism and nihilism is analogous.

Constantin Boundas refers to these links between nihilism and deconstruction in order to reformulate nihilism through 'the deconstruction of nihilism' – nihilism *after* deconstruction.⁴³ He attempts to create a 'deconstructive nihilism' based upon a reading of nihilism in which nihilism, rather than being 'the assimilation of difference', is characterised by 'openness to unassimilated Otherness'.⁴⁴ Boundas' thesis is flawed, however, because whilst he recognises that two formulations of deconstruction exist, a 'dominant' trend and a 'minoritarian' trend (what might be termed 'first-phase' and 'second-phase' deconstruction, respectively), he mistakenly argues that Derrida is himself part of the dominant trend.

⁴² Martin Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche: "God is Dead"", in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. by William Lovitt (New York: Garland, 1978), pp. 53-112 (pp. 67-68).

⁴³ Constantin V. Boundas, 'Minoritarian Deconstruction of the Rhetoric of Nihilism', in *Nietzsche and the Rhetoric of Nihilism: Essays on Interpretation, Language and Politics*, ed. by Tom Darby, Béla Egyed, and Ben Jones (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1989), pp. 81-92 (p. 86).

⁴⁴ Boundas, pp. 82, 87.

Derrida is ironically (and deconstructively?) absent from Boundas' so-called Derridan deconstruction – 'the fashionable "anti-foundationalist" merry-go-rounds of arch-writing' – and is rather part of the tradition that Boundas identifies as 'minoritarian'.⁴⁵ This 'minoritarian' deconstruction, which 'proclaims the critical necessity of ontology without metaphysics', is Levinasian in the sense that it refuses to assimilate the Other within its discourse.⁴⁶ Whilst Boundas' construction of a 'deconstructive nihilism' is laudable, it fails to take into account the links between Derrida and Levinas that Robbins observes:

At the limit, not only can deconstructive questioning be said to respond to an ethical demand when, seeking out suppressed alterities, it interrupts the totalities of a discourse. But also when Levinas [...] exposits the self(-same) as internally bordered by the other, ethics entails precisely the deconstruction of a secure and self-sufficient self.⁴⁷

Levinasian ethics is deconstructive, and Derridan deconstruction is ethical: it is only the appropriation of deconstruction by others that creates a 'dominant' deconstruction. Although Boundas' deconstruction of the rhetoric of nihilism suggests a potential formulation of deconstructive nihilism, this is already structured within a framework unsuited to it. Boundas' deconstructive nihilism is more about the nihilism of deconstruction than it is about the deconstruction of nihilism, and we must therefore turn to other arguments in order to see the formulation of a 'postmodern' nihilism.

⁴⁵ Boundas, p. 81.

⁴⁶ Boundas, p. 81.

⁴⁷ Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), p. xviii.

‘Everything looked and sounded unreal’: Nihilism and Postmodernism

The arguments surrounding nihilism and postmodernism are similar to those surrounding nihilism and poststructuralism: those who disagree with postmodernism call it nihilistic and those who agree with postmodernism defend it from nihilism. Many critics call postmodernism nihilistic because postmodernism rejects certain concepts as metanarratives. For example, Christian critics reject postmodernism because it is a secular philosophy and Marxist critics reject postmodernism because it is deeply embedded within, and complicit with, ‘late capitalism’. Although these positions take different approaches to the ‘nihilism’ of postmodernism, they both originate from the same source, as Nealon argues: “The dominant critique of postmodernism, in whatever form, is that it does not attend to such a metaphysical or historical “real””.⁴⁸ The relation of this ‘real’ to postmodernism reflects the attitude of Christianity and Marxism towards postmodernism.

Christianity (more generally, orthodox religion) calls postmodernism nihilistic because it rejects the idea of a transcendent divine. To such religions, this is a metaphysical ‘real’, and so its rejection must be nihilistic. Postmodernism, to many, indicates the widespread moral decay of Western, primarily Christian, standards. Critics such as Anthony Harrigan feel that this decay is nihilistic and, if it is attributable to postmodernism, then postmodernism is nihilistic:

The essence of post-modernism is nihilism – the denial of any meaning or purpose in existence – or, more exactly, the triumph of nihilism in societies of the Western world. It is a phenomenon identical with atheism as it denies the existence of any permanent ethical order. It marks a turning away from the moral teachings that have come down to us from Moses and brought to their highest level in Christianity. Nihilism is worse than

⁴⁸ Nealon, p. 75, n. 6.

paganism because the pagans knew no better. It is worse than barbarism, for the barbarians of antiquity at least based their lives on tribal rules.⁴⁹

Postmodernism is nihilistic because it promotes a pantheon of modern gods: contingency, not absolutism; ethical relativism, not Christian morality; the present, not the past. Harrigan charts this growing nihilism in postmodern America from Nazi attacks on Christianity to sexual education, from linguistic and artistic profanity to ‘road rage’. These are all examples of ‘nihilism’ for Harrigan, and are all aspects of the ‘postmodern turn’: ‘Gradually, however, over a half century, the old moral order was forced to give way to nihilism, to a belief in nothing, and the retreat from moral civilization was cloaked and disguised’.⁵⁰ The absence of the deistic ‘real’ means, for Harrigan, that postmodernism is nihilistic.

Likewise, Marxists reject postmodernism because it places no weight upon historical circumstance, because it rejects the ‘reality’ of production. Marxist critics argue against postmodernism on the grounds of its textuality, its replacement of history with narrativity, and its inability to formulate ‘real world solutions’ to ‘real world problems’. Stuart Sim, for example, argues that postmodernism is politically impotent: ‘The question at issue is not really whether narrative or metanarrative is preferable, but whether these terms have any relevance – or reference – within the socio-political sphere’.⁵¹ Sim uses Marxist terms to criticise postmodernism’s lack of progress towards the emancipation of the working classes. In fact, postmodernism is not politically ignorant but reactionary. He writes that ‘Tending to your own little narrative, agonistically or otherwise, looks very much like a conservative tactic to keep change to a manageable minimum within the confines of a comfortable *status*

⁴⁹ Anthony Harrigan, ‘Post-Modern Nihilism in America’, *St. Croix Review*, 31:5 (1998), 24-32 (p. 24).

⁵⁰ Harrigan, p. 25.

⁵¹ Stuart Sim, ‘Lyotard and the Politics of Antifoundationalism’, *Radical Philosophy*, 44 (1996), 8-13 (p. 9).

quo'.⁵² Such interpretations suggest that postmodernism – as postmodernity – is implicit with the rise of consumer capitalism, as both Jameson and Harvey argue. This is nihilistic inasmuch as it is again part of the moral decline of the Western world, only this time because postmodernism rejects economic 'real' of Marxism.

In some ways, therefore, postmodernism *is* equivalent to nihilism because postmodernism refutes other philosophies and thus the (perceived) destruction of Christianity and Marxism by postmodernism means that postmodernism *is* nihilistic to Christianity and Marxism. There are problems with these critiques of postmodernism, however, because of the problem of the *différend*. Similarly, it is difficult to blindly accept Lyotard's own incredulity towards metanarratives. The *différend*, as we have seen, arises when there is a conflict between two forms of argument: 'A case of the *différend* between two parties takes place when the "regulation" of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in the idiom'.⁵³ Thus, the *différend* emerges when there is a conflict between two 'genres of discourse' which each supplies 'a set of phrases, each arising from some phrase regimen'.⁵⁴ This conflict cannot be resolved because both the phrases and genres are heterogeneous. Neither Marxism nor Christianity can validate their criticisms of postmodernism because they do not argue from the same 'genre of discourse' or 'phrase regimen' as postmodernism. Similarly, postmodernism invalidates its own criticisms of metanarratives such as Marxism and Christianity because they must be allowed to retain their Otherness.

⁵² Sim, p. 10

⁵³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. by Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 9.

⁵⁴ Lyotard, *The Differend*, p. xii.

There are other ways in which the ‘unreality’ of postmodernism manifests itself in relation to nihilism. The destruction of the real (what Baudrillard has called ‘*the desert of the real*’) points towards a formulation of postmodernism in which, ‘everything looked and sounded unreal’.⁵⁵ Postmodernism can be understood as a discursive network of the ‘unreal’ founded upon the decline of manufacturing (post-industrial) and the rise of information as a commodity, what Lyotard calls ‘the mercantilization of knowledge’.⁵⁶ This is, of course, akin to Baudrillard’s hyperreal, in which it is ‘the map that precedes the territory’, although most critics see the Information Age as somehow postmodern: Lyotard’s ‘language games’ emphasise its linguistic and communicative variants, Vattimo analyses its impact on hermeneutics, and Paul Virilio studies its militarism.⁵⁷ However, where Lyotard and Vattimo are optimistic about the Information Age, Baudrillard and Virilio are not so convinced. Furthermore, although both Vattimo and Lyotard agree on the positive view of the Information Age, they disagree on the extent to which nihilism is part of this transformation. Lyotard argues that postmodernism is a (sublime) response to the nihilism of modernity, whereas Vattimo sees in postmodernism the realisation of an (sublime) emancipatory nihilism.

Lyotard argues that pluralism originates in the distribution of information because were everybody given access to all information (not only that held about them, but also about others) then emancipation from totalitarian control could occur. For Lyotard, ‘the mercantilization of knowledge is bound to affect the privilege the nation-states have enjoyed’ to the extent that this may threaten their very existence. He continues: ‘The ideology of

⁵⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 1.

⁵⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1999), p. 5.

⁵⁷ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 1.

communicational “transparency,” which goes hand in hand with the commercialization of knowledge, will begin to perceive the State as a factor of opacity and “noise”.⁵⁸ Although Lyotard realises that there are problems with this – new questions to answer, such as, ‘Who will have access [...]? Who will determine which channels or data are forbidden?’ – his solution seems naïve: ‘Give the public free access to the memory and data banks’.⁵⁹ The ultimate ‘transparent society’ is, for Lyotard, complete freedom of information for all, predicated upon the delegitimation of knowledge, where information and knowledge are no longer legitimated by the State or the Corporation (which was the case within nihilistic modernity), but instead remain contingent, subject to alteration at any point. This creates a differential network of Wittgensteinian language games whose rules ‘do not carry within themselves their own legitimation’, so that ‘there is no game’ despite the fact that ‘every utterance should be thought of as a “move” in a game’ (what Lyotard calls *agonistics*).⁶⁰

This contrasts sharply with Vattimo’s perception of a ‘transparent society’. Lyotardian transparency originates in the delegitimation of knowledge, which for Vattimo is part of the problem:

The freedom given by the mass media to so many cultures and *Weltanschauungen* has belied the very ideal of a transparent society. What could freedom of information, or even the existence of more than one radio or TV channel, mean in a world where the norm is the exact reproduction of reality, perfect objectivity, the complete identity of map and territory?⁶¹

⁵⁸ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 5.

⁵⁹ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, pp. 6, 67.

⁶⁰ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 10.

⁶¹ Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, trans. by David Webb (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), pp. 6-7.

Vattimo suggests that there is no point in delegitimizing knowledge if knowledge is still the reification of Nature (‘the complete identity of map and territory’), siding with Baudrillard against Lyotard. However, in contrast to Baudrillard, Vattimo argues that there is real emancipatory potential within the Information Age, which arises from a Nietzschean conflict where ‘the increase in possible information on the myriad forms of reality makes it increasingly difficult to conceive of a *single* reality’ – the realisation of the fabular nature of the world.⁶² For Vattimo, ‘the ideal of emancipation’ has shifted from ‘lucid self-consciousness’ to ‘the erosion of the very “principle of reality”’.⁶³ Thus, although ‘the mass media play a decisive role in the birth of postmodern society [...] they do not make this postmodern society more ‘transparent’, but more complex, even chaotic’ to such an extent that ‘it is in precisely this relative “chaos” that our hopes for emancipation lie.’⁶⁴ Rather than mass media producing the ‘general homogenisation of society’ proposed by Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Vattimo argues that ‘what actually happened, in spite of the effort of monopolies and major centres of capital, was that radio, television and newspapers became elements in a general explosion and proliferation of *Weltanschauungen*, of world views’.⁶⁵ This is an opaque pluralism, where the promulgation of difference (*différance?*) leads to an overcoming of a prior nihilism. Vattimo’s perception of postmodernism is still nihilistic, however, because it originates in his positive perception of Nietzsche and Heidegger. This means that Vattimo, whilst seeing nihilism in postmodern society, perceives this to be positive because ‘in demonstrating that being does not necessarily coincide with what is stable, fixed and permanent’, nihilism shows being to be concerned with ‘the event, with consensus, dialogue and interpretation’. Both Nietzsche and Heidegger are ‘trying to

⁶² Vattimo, p. 7.

⁶³ Vattimo, p. 7.

⁶⁴ Vattimo, p. 4.

⁶⁵ Vattimo, p. 5.

show us how to take the experience of oscillation in the postmodern world as an opportunity of a new way of being (finally, perhaps) human'.⁶⁶

Whilst Lyotard and Vattimo characterise the postmodern as an emancipatory pluralism in which 'the pen is mightier than the sword', Virilio argues, like Baudrillard, that the knowledge economy this is predominantly concerned with control, although for Virilio this is the realisation of 'pure war':

Pure War is neither peace nor war; nor is it, as was believed, 'absolute' or 'total' war. Rather, it is the military procedure itself, in its ordinary durability [...] In short, the dissolution of the state of war and the military's infiltration into the movements of daily life.⁶⁷

'Pure war' arises in three stages, each reflecting a movement in the concentration of humanity in cities. The first is *tactics*, or 'the art of the hunt', which is for the most part the most basic human war – what Virilio elsewhere calls 'direct confrontation'.⁶⁸ The second, *strategy*, occurs with the rise of the city-state or *polis* and is 'the whole military-political system of the traditional city'.⁶⁹ 'Strategy' is the stage at which 'true' war appears (rather than prior 'tumults'), because the rise of the *polis* corresponds to self- and national-identification.⁷⁰ The third stage, the *war economy*, occurs when 'Logistics takes over'.⁷¹

Of these three stages, the 'war economy' (as 'logistics') is the most important to understanding the nihilism of postmodernism. Although this seems initially to reflect a

⁶⁶ Vattimo, p. 11.

⁶⁷ Paul Virilio, *Popular Defense and Ecological Struggles*, trans. by Mark Polizzotti (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990), p. 35.

⁶⁸ Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer, *Pure War*, trans. by Mark Polizzotti (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), p. 22; Virilio, *Popular Defense and Ecological Struggles*, p. 35.

⁶⁹ Virilio and Lotringer, p. 22.

⁷⁰ Virilio defines earlier forms of warfare as 'tumults' in Virilio and Lotringer, p. 11.

⁷¹ Virilio and Lotringer, p. 23.

Marxist perception of postmodernism (inasmuch as it is an ‘economy’), Virilio argues that ‘When the State was constituted, it developed war as an organization, as territorial economy, as economy of capitalization, of technology’.⁷² This adumbrates industrialisation, economics, and politics within ‘logistics’, in which everything is subordinate to military planning. Furthermore, logistics is implicated with the Enlightenment Project: the rise of rationality (‘to conduct a war is to execute a rational plan’) and the promotion of Technology over Nature (‘It is our own nature exchanging with all of Nature’) are both steps in the creation of a war economy’.⁷³ It is therefore significant that Virilio identifies the origins of the war economy in the 1870s, with increased military budgets and the logistical planning of warfare.⁷⁴ The 1870s was the period of Russian Nihilism – nihilism as emancipation from state control – but it was also the time when the ‘state of nihilism’ came to be realised, what Virilio calls ‘the nihilism of consumption (consumption of nothing, security and services)’.⁷⁵ It also marks the advent of Nietzschean nihilism, not in the death of God, but in the creation of the will-to-power. The Nietzschean conflict that Vattimo emphasises in the postmodern is part of Virilio’s ‘war economy’ inasmuch as the ‘*Dionysian* world of the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying’ is the ‘*will to power – and nothing besides!*’.⁷⁶ The Nietzschean will-to-power is merely another expression for the rise of pure war because we must ‘never confuse *Pure Power* (the military thing) with *Domination* (the State)’.⁷⁷ ‘Logistics’ is therefore similar to Baudrillard’s hyperreal because it is not ‘domination’, in which there is always a dominant force, but ‘pure power’, the complete abstraction implicit in a militaristic ideology without armies, generals, or nations.

⁷² Virilio and Lotringer, p. 11.

⁷³ Virilio, *Popular Defense and Ecological Struggles*, pp. 20, 31.

⁷⁴ See Virilio and Lotringer, p. 22.

⁷⁵ Virilio, *Popular Defense and Ecological Struggles*, p. 105.

⁷⁶ Nietzsche, §1067 (p. 550).

⁷⁷ Virilio, *Popular Defense and Ecological Struggles*, p. 22.

The relation of this to the ‘transparent society’ of postmodernism is seen throughout Virilio’s works. Media is the ultimate form of warfare because it realises the ‘state of nihilism’ inasmuch as this is about communication and concentration – tightly-planned and executed ‘delivery’ systems of both missiles and missives (to use Derrida’s pun) – rather than the ‘traditional’ warfare of territory.⁷⁸ The Information Age is the realisation of logistics because war is no longer territorial, but domestic:

Today, in order to create a *totalitarian Lebensraum*, it is no longer necessary to resort to extraordinary invasions with the motorized vehicles, tanks and stukas of lightning warfare, since one can use the *ordinary penetration* of the new media, the information blitz.⁷⁹

This domestication of war is the result of the increased abstraction of humanity and Nature to such an extent that it is not that ‘the map that precedes the territory’ but that *the map itself no longer exists*. Physical location is no longer important, as the media gives global coverage, and so ‘pure war’ is much more concerned with communications technology than it is with physical territory – the pen is the sword. Seen in this way, the rhetoric of poststructuralism and postmodernism appears in a new light. Deconstruction, defined by Derrida as ‘an *overturning* of the classical opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system’, attempts to deconstruct the violent hierarchy of representation.⁸⁰ Its rhetoric is one of philosophical warfare, with ‘oppositions’, ‘forces’, ‘overturnings’, and ‘neutralization’. Similarly, Lyotard’s conclusion to ‘What is Postmodernism?’ explicitly evokes conflict: ‘Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the

⁷⁸ See Jacques Derrida, ‘No Apocalypse, Not Now (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives)’, *Diacritics*, 14:2 (1984), 20-31.

⁷⁹ Virilio, *Popular Defense and Ecological Struggles*, p. 70.

⁸⁰ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 329.

honor of the name'.⁸¹ Seen in this way, both poststructuralism and postmodernism become implicated in the rise of the 'war economy' and the expression of 'pure war'.

This is part of Virilio's 'aesthetics of disappearance', the dissolution of movement into speed, again reprising the 'transparent society', only this time in its disappearance into speed: *'the true physical body of the modern totalitarian State, its speed-body'*.⁸² The 'aesthetics of disappearance' explicitly links nihilism with the postmodern because the disappearance of reality mirrors the rise of the 'state of nihilism'. Virilio defines picnolepsy, for example, a condition in which people 'phase out' of temporal awareness, in terms of nihilism. The picnoleptic is unable to construct a continuous narrative from his personal experience because there are too many blanks: 'He'll be inclined to believe (like Sextus Empiricus) that nothing really exists; that even if there is existence, it cannot be described; and that even if it could be described, it could certainly not be communicated to others'.⁸³ This, Virilio writes elsewhere, 'confirms our sense that acceleration and deceleration, or the movement of movement, are the only true dimensions of space, of speed-space, of dromospheric space'.⁸⁴

'Speed', seen in terms of instantaneous information transfer and global networks, marks the disappearance of being into space. Everything is subordinated to speed because 'To go nowhere, even to ride around in a deserted quarter or on a crowded freeway, now seems natural for the voyeur-voyager in his car' to such an extent that 'to stop, to park, are unpleasant operations'.⁸⁵ Virilio frequently makes reference to the archetypal road trip, the need for speed in empty space, although this is not a celebration of freedom, but the revelation of 'pure war':

⁸¹ Lyotard, p. 82.

⁸² Virilio, *Popular Defense and Ecological Struggles*, p. 92.

⁸³ Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, trans. by Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), pp. 10-11. See also page 12 of this thesis.

⁸⁴ Paul Virilio, *The Lost Dimension*, trans. by Daniel Moshenberg (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), p. 102.

⁸⁵ Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, p. 67.

*And what if the primary goal of travel was not to 'go' somewhere, but simply to no longer be where one is? What if the aim of movement has become like that of military invasions or sports records: to go faster while going nowhere, in other words to disappear? Drop-outs, beat generation, migrants, motorists: the unknown soldiers of the order of speeds?'*⁸⁶

This, for Virilio, epitomises the postmodern age. In contrast to Baudrillard's Disney-fication of reality, which functions as a 'false consciousness', speed is a more secure realisation of 'pure war' because 'The nihilism of technique destroys the world less surely than the nihilism of speed destroys the world's truth'.⁸⁷ Being is consumed in speed – '*you don't have speed, you are speed*' – and therefore all truth is destroyed by speed:

[Speed is] a final abolition of differences, of distinctions between nature and culture, utopia and reality, since technology, in making the rite-of-passage a continuous phenomenon, would make of the derangement of the senses a permanent state, conscious life becoming an oscillating trip whose only absolute poles would be birth and death; and all this would mean, of course, the end of religions and philosophies.⁸⁸

Thus, postmodernism – as the era of speed (and the culmination of the Enlightenment Project) – is equivalent to nihilism because the destruction of real is the (un)realisation of 'pure war'. It is the ultimate culmination of warfare to such an extent that the 'transparent society' signifies the disappearance of humanity.

There is an alternative to this 'state of nihilism', which returns us briefly to Marxist theory. In Harvey's theory of 'overaccumulation', postmodernism is constructed as 'a condition in which idle capital and idle labour supply could exist side by side with no

⁸⁶ Virilio, *Popular Defense and Ecological Struggles*, p. 99-100. Virilio's use of 'sports records' here evokes Lyotard's 'agonistic' language games, only this time as part of the 'nihilism of speed', rather than Sim's 'status quo'.

⁸⁷ Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, p. 69.

⁸⁸ Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, pp. 92-93.

apparent way in which to bring these idle resources together to accomplish socially useful tasks'.⁸⁹ This adumbrates postmodernism within the sphere of economic practice and presents it as a reactionary movement intended to counter 'overaccumulation' – excess production – before it threatens capitalism. Despite this, Harvey inadvertently refers to the knowledge economy, in which 'overaccumulation' is an aspect of the 'capital' of ideas, rather than monetary economics: 'The sharp categorical distinction between modernism and postmodernism disappears, to be replaced by an examination of the flux of internal relations within capitalism as a whole'.⁹⁰ Although these 'internal relations' are seen in relation to capitalism, they also signify 'consumer' choices from the 'capital' of ideas. There are therefore two possible interpretations of nihilism in relation to postmodernism that, although responses to overaccumulation, suggest a distinction between a nihilism of 'pure war' and a nihilism of emancipation.

The first interpretation suggests that philosophy has integrated nihilism within it and reveals itself when Harvey demonstrates the methods of capitalism to contain 'overaccumulation' – 'devaluation', 'macro-economic control', and 'absorption'. These three methods of dealing with overaccumulation correspond loosely to Walter Anderson's three potential responses to the 'postmodern condition' – constructivism, play, and nihilism.⁹¹ 'Macro-economic control' is an allegory of a return to metanarratives, the 'institutionalization of some system of regulation' in which difference is co-opted into one over-arching thematic: this corresponds loosely to Anderson's constructivist perspective, in which 'roles

⁸⁹ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), p. 180.

⁹⁰ Harvey, p. 342.

⁹¹ Walter Truett Anderson, 'Four Different Ways to Be Absolutely Right', in *The Fontana Postmodernism Reader*, ed. by Walter Truett Anderson (London: Fontana Press, 1996), pp. 106-12 (p. 107).

are good, useful tools for making a society work and giving people a sense of identity'.⁹² Although the constructivist viewpoint admits that social behaviour is reified, it deems it important to the construction of society: Rorty and Fish are critics that promote this kind of postmodern perspective. The second method, 'absorption', is the method by which postmodernism continues to function *as postmodernism* because it suggests temporal and spatial displacement. The first absorptive method is 'an acceleration in turnover time' suggested by the Derrida's 'need for speed' and Virilio's 'nihilism of speed'.⁹³ The second, 'the absorption of excess capital and labour in geographical expansion', is seen in the globalising tendencies of postmodernism where the rise of postcolonial and feminist writing is not a search for difference but a deferment of the centre towards the periphery.⁹⁴ The third method – 'time-space displacements' – delineates the instantaneous communication noted by Baudrillard, in which it is both 'instantaneous' (temporal) and 'communication' (spatial).⁹⁵ This corresponds to Anderson's concept of 'postmodern play', where players 'browse among cultural forms, play mix-and-match with all the pieces of our various heritage'.⁹⁶ It is 'devaluation', however, that suggests nihilism because it implies a Nietzschean moment at which capitalism must devalue itself in order to survive – Virilio and Baudrillard's theses of '*you don't have speed, you are speed*' and 'simulacral doubling', respectively.⁹⁷ This reading demonstrates nihilism as merely another 'consumer' choice from the 'capital' of ideas because although nihilism and postmodernism are contrasted, they are implicitly related to metaphysical modes of thought.

⁹² Harvey, p. 180; Anderson, p. 111.

⁹³ Harvey, p. 182. See Derrida, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now', pp. 20-21 and Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, p. 69.

⁹⁴ Harvey, p. 183. This suggests that postmodernism is an ideological 'false consciousness' that hides the overaccumulation through displacement.

⁹⁵ Harvey, p. 184. See Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. by Chris Turner (Oxford: Polity Press, 1994).

⁹⁶ Anderson, p. 108.

⁹⁷ Harvey, p. 181. See page 110 of this thesis for a discussion of Baudrillard's concept of 'simulacral doubling'.

The second interpretation of postmodernism's nihilism, nihilism as emancipation from the economy of ideas, relies on linking Harvey's 'overaccumulation' to Goudsblom's 'nihilist problematic':

The co-existence of truths only becomes problematic when one is prepared to compare and assess them as equals. Then the arguments *pro* and *contra* assume a new cogency, with the possible result that one begins to doubt the validity of claims of *any* of the parties.⁹⁸

'The co-existence of truths' implies overaccumulation *within philosophy*, and nihilism is therefore the refusal to 'buy into' any of the choices presented. If each 'consumer choice' is equally invalid, then there is a warning – *Caveat Emptor!* – that the buyer must beware of any of the philosophies on display, and leave the metaphysical shop altogether. This second interpretation defines 'postmodern nihilism' because although nihilism is considered under the auspices of postmodernism, it is a nihilism that devalues itself, that defers the possibility of coming into the rational economy of the known. When Baudrillard writes that 'What is essential is that nothing escape the empire of meaning', this therefore signifies not only the totalising project of the knowledge economy but also the fact that 'nothing' must always remain outside 'the empire of meaning': a 'postmodern' nihilism.⁹⁹

Postmodern Nihilism

In '*Ex nihilo*', this thesis explored historical versions of nihilism and nothingness, before the 'postmodern era'. Nihilism was opposed to the ideological norm: to Christianity, nihilism is

⁹⁸ Goudsblom, p. 92.

⁹⁹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 137.

atheism; to authoritarian ideologies, nihilism is anarchism; to post-Christian thought, Christianity itself is nihilistic; and to the contemporary sensibility, nihilism is equated with barbarism and destruction:

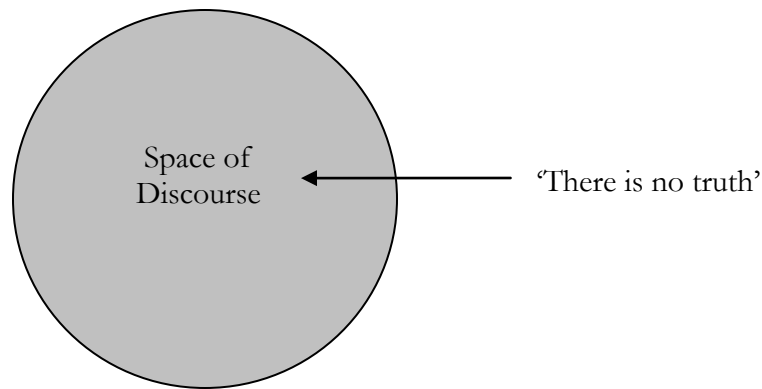
	Passive	Active
Individual	Rationality (Humanist)	Russian Nihilism (Anti-Authoritarian)
Social	Christianity (Anti-Humanist)	National Socialism (Authoritarian)

4.1 Nihilisms before Postmodernism

Although these formulations are ‘valid’ within their respective chronological periods, problems arise when nihilism is considered in relation to postmodernism because these binary oppositions – individual/social, passive/active, and humanist/anti-humanist – break down under the postmodern. This is due to the paradoxical nature of postmodernism and its propensity for ‘double-coding’, a movement that conflates opposing concepts within the postmodern (as pluralist truth, not as synthesis). Postmodernism only really contains one exception to this breakdown of binary oppositions: the opposition between authoritarianism and anti-authoritarianism. Although both authoritarianism and anti-authoritarianism are significantly altered, the opposition remains. This is no longer ideological nihilism (National Socialism) as opposed to anti-ideological nihilism (Russian Nihilism) but aesthetic distinctions in the creation of art that themselves suggest ideological approaches – a case of life reflecting art or, at least, theory. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, there are only two formulations of nihilism – ‘modernist nihilism’ and ‘postmodern nihilism’. ‘Modernist nihilism’ summarises those earlier revolutionary formulations of nihilism that

sought to escape from certain strictures but which reinforced themselves: authoritarian nihilism. 'Postmodern nihilism', in contrast, is that which attempts to escape from even its own strictures. Postmodernism suggests the possibility of a reflexive nihilism that is not cultural *ennui* but a liberating (or, at the very least, ethical) turn away from ideological processes: anti-authoritarian nihilism.

Modernist nihilism is constructed in such a way that the statement, 'There is no truth' remains outside the 'space of discourse' it is trying to negate, *even though it is actually part of that space*. To say that there is no truth, without reflexivity, is to say that, 'there is no truth but this statement'. This means, in ethical nihilism, that 'there is no moral law but this moral law', in semantic nihilism that 'there is no sentential structure or meaning past that which conveys the meaning of this sentence', and in epistemological nihilism that 'there is no knowledge past the knowledge contained in this sentence'. Each of these statements is *proscriptive*, proscribing a state of affairs beyond the immediate sentence whilst refusing to invalidate themselves: they impose a form of control where they retain 'truth' but nothing else does. The statement itself retains truth unattainable to other semantic formulations because it remains outside the discursive space that it devalues. Modernist nihilism – the sum of the historical nihilisms – is a totalitarian nothingness where nothing else but nihilism can exist. It is an attempt to remain what Lyotard would term a 'good form' by locating itself outside that which it is erasing:



4.2 Modernist Nihilism

Modernist nihilism is, in effect, a metanarrative, a *weltanschauung* that denies all others. This is modernist in the sense that Lyotard uses the term *modern* 'to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse'.¹⁰⁰ Modernist nihilism legitimates itself by being a metadiscourse, by remaining outside of discourse and proscribing the truth. When nihilism is proscriptive, it is the centre from which all judgements about truth are made, and yet, in order for this to be true, its centre has to be somewhere other than in this proscribed totality of untruth. Returning briefly to Derrida, we can see this in relation to his famous 'the centre is not the centre' argument:

Classical thought concerning structure could say that the centre is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside* it. The centre is the centre of the totality, and yet, since the centre does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its centre elsewhere*. The centre is not the centre.¹⁰¹

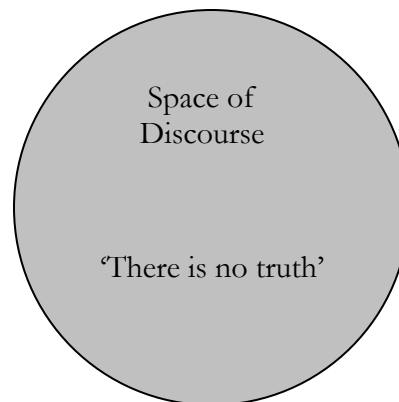
When we see nihilism in this way, we see that it has the same 'symptom' as those transcendental signifiers that Derrida criticises. The centre of nihilism cannot be the centre

¹⁰⁰ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xxiii.

¹⁰¹ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 279.

of nihilism. Nihilism – ‘modernist nihilism’ – can only function by decentring itself. If, however, nihilism is to be a valid philosophy and one that has emancipatory potential, it must be something that destroys itself. That is, one must read ‘there is no truth’ as a semantic paradox: even the statement itself is not true.

Postmodern nihilism is concerned with the idea that nihilism cannot truthfully say that ‘there is no truth’. This formulation would not attempt to remain outside of that which it negates, meaning that the statement itself would be *both* true *and* untrue, or, as it is nihilism, *neither* true *nor* untrue. This can be considered postmodern because it cannot remain true and dictate the truth to everything else. In this formulation, the nihilistic statement itself is part of that which it is negating – ‘there is no truth’ applying to itself as well as everything else:



4.3 Postmodern Nihilism

In this way, postmodern nihilism can be considered *reflexive*, not commenting on anything outside of itself, or rather including itself in that which it is negating. Nihilism, as we have seen, emphasises that ‘there is no truth’; for nihilism to be stable, this statement must be true. If this statement is true, however, nihilism is ultimately self-defeating because it cannot

be ‘true’ that there is no ‘truth’. Thus, nihilism is neither true nor false: a ‘deconstructed’ nihilism. Of course, this suggests a Sartrean consciousness within reflexive nihilism, in which nothingness exists in the unresolved conflict between ‘nihilism’ and ‘nihilism’. Although this could be termed ‘existential nihilism’, it also implies the sublime moment identified in relation to the ‘romantic sublime’, which again returns nihilism back to the sublime form.¹⁰²

Postmodern nihilism therefore delegitimises itself, is incredulous of its own metanarrativity, and ‘denies itself the solace of good forms’.¹⁰³ This formulation is, in fact, an inherent potential throughout the history of nihilism although it is never fully realised in any period before postmodernism. This becomes clear in relation to certain conceptions of nihilism that were presented in *Ex nihilo*. Reflexive nihilism is similar to Nietzsche’s definition of nihilism in that nihilism means ‘*That the highest values devalue themselves*’.¹⁰⁴ However, where Nietzsche’s definition was used against Christianity in order to define Christianity as nihilistic, Nietzsche did not refer this statement to nihilism itself: he wrote from ‘outside’ nihilism, rather than from ‘within’ it. Similarly, Heidegger defines the ‘action’ of nihilism as ‘The nothing itself nihilates’.¹⁰⁵ This translation of *Das Nicht nichtet* can suggest, as I have said, not only that nihilation is the action of nihilism but also that nihilism nihilates *itself*.¹⁰⁶ This formulation of nihilism is a blank void that is neither ‘blank’ nor a ‘void’ because to label it as such would suggest a linguistic construction in which nihilism is brought into being. The closest linguistic approximation of what reflexive nihilism means is perhaps ‘~~nihilism] does not exist~~’, where even as it attempts to be written it is being unwritten, or in a more extreme formulation ‘~~---~~’, where the ellipses are themselves acting under erasure

¹⁰² See pages 13-14 and 72-74 of this thesis.

¹⁰³ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 81.

¹⁰⁴ Nietzsche, §2 (p. 9).

¹⁰⁵ Martin Heidegger, ‘What is Metaphysics?’, in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. by David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 93-110 (p. 103).

¹⁰⁶ See page 35 of this thesis.

and the absence absents itself.¹⁰⁷ This conception of nihilism is central to both this thesis and to postmodernism, and relies upon the principles of paradox and self-referential semantic statements.

The principle of reflexive sentential paradoxes, or semantic paradoxes, is the creation of a grammatically valid sentence that is neither true nor false; in fact, that disproves itself. There are numerous versions of paradoxes that demonstrate the propensity of language towards logical nonsense, such as ‘The Preface’ and ‘The Preface Again’. ‘The Preface’ paradox comes from the fact that an author often submits a preface explaining that there may be inaccuracies in the text and yet ‘a sincere author will believe everything asserted in the text’, forcing himself into a contradiction.¹⁰⁸ This is ‘weak’ paradox, however, because it relies upon notions of belief and truth and so although it is inconsistent it is not truly paradoxical. A strengthened version of this appears in ‘The Preface Again’:

Suppose an author’s preface consists solely in this remark: ‘At least one statement in this book is false’. Then the body of the book must contain at least one false statement. For suppose it does not. Then if the preface is true, it is false, and if it is false, it is true; which is impossible.¹⁰⁹

This is a stronger paradox, as it allows the referential nature of the statement to work against itself, but it is still reliant upon the fact the text does not contain any errors; if the text contains errors then there is no paradox. Such paradoxes are common and, following this ‘Preface’ thread, can be pared down by removing any external material that refers to the

¹⁰⁷ These figures suggest the forms used by Heidegger and Derrida when they use terms such as ‘~~Being~~’ to signify the way in which being is both ‘written’ and ‘written over’. The problem with the formulation ‘~~nihilism~~ does not exist’ is that it suggests that nihilism has been written and then erased. The second formulation avoids this, although at the expense of defining nihilism in any meaningful way – which is exactly the point.

¹⁰⁸ R. M. Sainsbury, *Paradoxes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 148.

¹⁰⁹ Sainsbury, p. 148.

referential nature of the statement: ‘Assume that there is a text containing only one phrase: “At least one statement in this book is false”’. If this is the case then the only statement to which it can refer is itself, implying a self-referential statement. As the reflexive nature of this sentence disproves itself (that is, if it is true, it is false, and if it is false, it is true), only semantic paradox remains.

This kind of semantic paradox can be further pared down, for if the text contains only one sentence, then there is no need to refer to a ‘text’ at all, and the statement need only refer to itself. Hence, we see the statement ‘This statement is false’, or, in order to retain the requisite definition of truth, ‘This statement is not true’. This retains all the previous features of semantic paradox without having to refer to anything outside of itself. This statement cannot be true without being exempt from its own criteria, and is in fact a stronger version of the phrase ‘there is no truth’ that has been used throughout this thesis to define nihilism.¹¹⁰ Reflexive nihilism becomes paradoxical, and rather than being totalitarian and proscriptive, becomes ouroborotic, not being able to proclaim its own truth, lost in the void of its own creation.

This is true not only of single statements such as ‘This statement is not true’, but also of statements that refer to each other, such as the much-vaunted Liar Paradox. This paradox is predicated upon the statement ‘This statement is not true’ but it comes in two parts, the first of which may refer to such self-falsifying statements. The first claim is that, ‘(S) There is a sentence that says of itself only that it is not true’; the second claim is that, ‘(T) Any

¹¹⁰ ‘There is no truth’ is not inherently paradoxical. If it is considered true, then it creates a paradox because it is therefore false. However, if it is considered false, then no such paradox exists. Therefore, it is only when considered true that it creates a paradox, in much the same way as critics suggest that nihilism must be invalid for this very reason. Having now introduced this stronger formulation of nihilism, from this point on nihilism can be considered equivalent to the statement that ‘This sentence is not true’.

sentence is true if, and only if, what it says is the case'.¹¹¹ The first claim is obviously matched by such statements as, 'This sentence is not true', and Robert Martin diagnoses the incompatibility thus:

Suppose (S) is true, and let *s* be any such sentence. Then *s* cannot be true, for, since *s* says it is not true, if it were true it would not be true (by (I)). But since *s* is not true, and since that, and only that, is what *s* says, then (by (I)) *s* is true.¹¹²

In this we see yet another problem with the problem of self-referential statements. Semantic paradoxes do not defy logic so much as take logic to the *n*th degree, whereupon it begins to delegitimise itself. Logically, the sentence *s* is both true and false simultaneously (and therefore neither true nor false). The distinction between the Preface Paradoxes and the Liar Paradox is important in relation to postmodernism because there are two formulations of the paradoxical postmodern novel: one which is internally inconsistent (a 'Preface' formulation) and one in which paradox emerges through the presence of opposing ideologies within the same text (a 'Liar' formulation).

To return to the question that was asked at the end of '*Ex nihilo*', if nihilism is the philosophy of absolute negation, then why should it have any relevance, especially to ethics? Although Alain Badiou has argued that ethics is intrinsically nihilistic, saying that 'ethics would be better named – since it speaks Greek – a "*eu-oudénose*", a smug nihilism', it is rather the case that nihilism is ethical (as opposed to ethics being nihilistic).¹¹³ Adorno argued that

¹¹¹ Robert L. Martin, 'Introduction', in *Recent Essays on the Truth and Liar Paradox*, ed. by Robert L. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 1-8 (p. 1)

¹¹² Martin, p. 2.

¹¹³ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. by Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2002), p. 38.

nihilism was ‘the acme of abstraction, and the abstract is the abominable’ although his demand for a ‘negative dialectics’ suggests that nihilism may in fact be ethical:

If negative dialectics calls for the self-reflection of thinking, the tangible implication is that if thinking is to be true – if it to be true today, in any case – it must also be thinking against itself. If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims.¹¹⁴

Reflexive nihilism is the ‘self-reflection of thinking’ because it calls into being how we are to think about nothingness: it is the ‘thinking against itself’ that Adorno demands. Likewise, our inability to reconcile nihilism with itself suggests ‘the extremity that eludes the concept’. Thus, we do not overcome this formulation of nihilism because we have always already failed to understand it – it marks the point at which thought devaluates itself (Nietzsche), the point at which nihilism (an)nihilates itself (Heidegger). This is ethical because it suggests that we no longer have the right to propose anything, to act, or to do, because ‘if nothing is true, then nothing is justified’ (Goudsblom). This formulation also suggests that everything that exists within the realm of Being is Other to nothingness: in order to preserve its otherness we must not speak about it. Thus, it is that which calls the Self into question and forces it ‘to prefer that which justifies being over that which assures it’ (Levinas).¹¹⁵ Reflexive nihilism forces us to justify Being, and forces us to justify why we are, as opposed to why we are not. This is the ‘true’ ethic of nihilism, in which reflexive nihilism is not ‘ethical nihilism’ but an ‘ethical’ nihilism that informs our sense of existence.

¹¹⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 380, 365.

¹¹⁵ Levinas, p. 85.

5.

‘Welcome to the Fall’: Nihilism and Apocalypse

Everything is useless
 Nothing works at all
 Nothing ever matters
 Welcome to the Fall.

– Ministry, ‘The Fall’.¹

One of the most explicit strands of nihilism running throughout postmodern literature is the concept of apocalypse. As the lyrics from ‘The Fall’ indicate, the apocalypse symbolises complete destruction; nothing functions, nothing matters. There is a movement in the lyrics from ‘Everything is useless’ to ‘Nothing works at all’, however, which indicates the importance of nihilism to the apocalypse. ‘Everything is useless’ suggests that all things do not work, whereas ‘Nothing works at all / Nothing ever matters’ suggest an inversion of the previous statement – only ‘Nothing’ works, only ‘Nothing’ ever matters. ‘Welcome to the Fall’ therefore suggests not only the Biblical Fall but also, in modern times, ‘the death of God’, after which only nihilism remains. Postmodernism, as that which originates in the Holocaust, is therefore implicated with nihilism through its apocalyptic origins.

The concept of ‘apocalypse’ is actually one of the most important features of postmodern literature, encompassing both ‘the absurd’ and ‘absence’: the absurd is the response to apocalypse and absence is what remains after the apocalypse. The literature of the postmodern apocalypse is essentially one that deals with the extreme limits of being –

¹ Ministry, ‘The Fall’, from *Filth Pig*. Warner Bros. 1995.

being, as it were, at the end of the world. The Holocaust informs much postmodern theory, through figures such as Levinas and Blanchot, and this is reflected in the apocalyptic literature of postmodernism. Throughout postmodern discourse there is a sense that ‘the apocalypse has, in some sense, *already happened*’.² This *retrospective* apocalypse is tempered by a *prospective* apocalypse: postmodern fictions must also deal with the nuclear age and potential ecological disaster. There are therefore two extremes between which postmodernism is caught: the analeptic recuperation of previous traumas and the proleptic trace of (bi)millennial anxiety, the apocalypse that has been and the apocalypse to come. In this way, postmodernism can be characterised by the ‘two-faced’ Roman god, Janus. It is ‘two-faced’ not only because it is ‘double-coded’ – full of unresolved dyads – but also because it looks to the future and the past simultaneously.

Of course, postmodern literature is not the only form of literature concerned with the apocalypse. Literature has always been concerned with the ‘end of things’ because it represents social anxieties and so apocalyptic anxiety appears in every historical period: ‘The apocalyptic as a literary genre must be understood as a species of the larger genre of eschatology, the study of end things – *ta eschata*, the edge of horizon spatially or temporally’.³ This definition of apocalypse as horizon signifies the range that apocalyptic discourse may take. It may be concerned with death and rebirth, or just death; it may be concerned with the destruction of humanity or the destruction of an idea; it may signify a moving beyond a previous horizon or a turning back to a previous one. Literature does not use one formal

² James Berger, ‘Twentieth-Century Apocalypse: Forecasts and Aftermaths’, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 46:4 (2000), 387-95 (p. 388).

³ Quoted in Elana Gomel, ‘The Plague of Utopias: Pestilence and the Apocalyptic Body’, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 46:4 (2000), 405-33 (p. 407). The original source is Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon, 1966), p. 20.

rhetorical strategy or symbol to convey the meaning of apocalypse and so postmodern literature of the apocalypse is merely part of the larger apocalyptic genre.

Within the twentieth century itself, modernism and modernist literature deal with the idea of apocalypse. There are explicit associations between modernism and the apocalypse, for example, in T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' (1922). Although the apocalyptic Grail landscape of 'The Waste Land' is historically specific, such vistas extend to become the apocalyptic landscapes of postmodern literature. Consider, for example, Eliot's 'The Hollow Men' (1925):

This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.⁴

'*This is the way the world ends*' suggests that, for Eliot, the apocalypse is 'now', in the present, neither retrospective nor prospective. The relationship between modernist and postmodern apocalypses demonstrates the extent to which postmodernism is conditioned by an awareness of the modernist apocalypse. Although modernist literature deals with apocalypse, it cannot have the foresight to deal with elements of apocalypse that culminate later in the twentieth century. Postmodernism is post-apocalyptic, seeing in modernism the culmination of an apocalyptic Enlightenment modernity, and realises what Eliot cannot: the world may in fact end with a 'bang' because nuclear apocalypse is not a 'whimper'. Even after the cultural shock of the 'Great War' there was the Holocaust, MAD (a suitable acronym for 'Mutually

⁴ T. S. Eliot, 'The Hollow Men', in *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), pp. 67-70 (p. 70).

Assured Destruction’), and environmental catastrophe. It is with these forms of apocalypse that postmodern literature is primarily concerned. Postmodernism may exist in the ‘whimper’ but realises that there may be another ‘bang’ to come.

(Post)Modern Apocalypses

In the latter part of the twentieth century, there are a number of recurring tropes in the representation of the apocalypse. James Berger has argued that there are ‘four principle areas of postwar apocalyptic representation’, which are nuclear war, the Holocaust, ‘apocalypses of liberation’, and ‘postmodernity’.⁵ Literature dealing with nuclear war and the Holocaust are self-evidently apocalyptic discourses, although ‘apocalypses of liberation’ and ‘postmodernity’ seem not to fit within Catherine Keller’s aforementioned definition of apocalypse as ‘the study of end things’. Berger argues that these are apocalyptic discourses because they act in a destructive manner upon previous ideological formulations, which they attempt to suppress. This is nihilism inasmuch as nihilism was defined historically as ‘*any* negation that attacks dominant ideological practices’: an ideological apocalypse.⁶

‘Apocalypses of liberation’ are those narratives concerned with feminism, postcolonialism, and queer theory. These are apocalyptic because such narratives rupture the hegemonic discourse of white ‘Western’ men: ‘The ends – imagined, wished for, struggled for, and resisted – of male, white Euro-American colonial and heterosexist domination (and even of gender, race, and nation as meaningful concepts) all have been figured in apocalyptic terms’.⁷ By interrogating such terms, these previously ‘Othered’ narratives act in an

⁵ Berger, p. 390.

⁶ See page 7 of this thesis.

⁷ Berger, p. 391.

apocalyptic manner upon hegemonic discourse. Such narratives interpret history as apocalyptic, as well as acting in an apocalyptic manner upon history, because not only do they seek to destroy those values which gave rise to the persecution of those Other to white, Western, heterosexual, masculine discourse, but they also exhibit a rhetoric in which they are themselves under the influence of a past apocalypse. The ‘apocalypses’ of feminism, postcolonialism, and queer theory not only act in an apocalyptic manner, but also write from the apocalypse that was white, male, colonial, heterosexual discourse.

The ‘postcolonial’ apocalypse appears in black fiction of the 1950s and 1960s, with the rise of the civil liberties movement. This ‘postcolonial apocalypse’ is, in many ways, a ‘postcolonial nihilism’, because authors such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison appropriate nihilism for black society. Wright’s works, including *The Outsider* (1953) and the novella ‘The Man Who Lived Underground’ (1944), show the implicit nihilism of black culture. Whereas Albert Camus’ ‘outsider’ of *The Stranger* (1942) epitomises existential philosophy and rejects the concept of society, Wright’s ‘outsider’ is doubly outside, already outside the dominant (white) culture and further exteriorised by his distance from his own oppressed (black) culture. Cross Damon, the eponymous ‘Outsider’, has ‘no party, no myths, no tradition, no race, no soil, no culture, and no ideas – except perhaps the idea that ideas in themselves were, at best, dubious’.⁸ Such ‘Ideas’, as Nick De Genova realises, are part of the larger ‘institution of constraint and repression’ – white culture – that Damon is trying to avoid, and so Damon’s subversion of the white hegemony is nihilistic.⁹ The idea of a black nihilism is also seen in ‘The Man Who Lived Underground’, where a white policeman says ‘You’ve got to shoot his kind. They’d wreck things’, where ‘things’ means the edifice of

⁸ Richard Wright, *The Outsider* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), p. 377.

⁹ Nick De Genova, ‘Gangster Rap and Nihilism in Black America: Some Questions of Life and Death’, *Social Text*, 13:2 (1995), 89-132 (p. 100).

white society, what Yoshinobu Hakutani calls ‘the system of oppression’.¹⁰ This means that, by acting as an apocalypse on white culture, black activism is seen as a form of nihilism. Such a perception marginalises the problem of nihilism in relation to black culture, however, because it unproblematically categorises political activism as nihilism. This is seen clearly in Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), where the shift of the character of Ras, from ‘Exhorter’ to ‘Destroyer’ is the result of manipulation by the Stalinist ‘Brotherhood’. Ras’ destructive nihilism actually supports the dominant (white) ideology by reinforcing the perception of black culture as violent, savage, and destructive, rather than subverting it. The Brotherhood is not about emancipation but control, as the ‘invisible man’ realises: ‘The committee planned it. And I had helped, had been a tool. A tool just at the very moment I had thought myself free’.¹¹

Black fiction’s depiction of nihilism is therefore ambivalent. Wright’s nihilism, for example, is not intrinsically destructive, because it is the overcoming of an earlier nihilism perpetrated by white culture, corresponding to the idea that ‘apocalypses of liberation’ not only act apocalyptically but also act from an earlier apocalypse. Fred Daniels, the protagonist of ‘The Man Who Lived Underground’, reveals this aspect of black nihilism: ‘Maybe *anything’s* right, he mumbled. Yes, if the world as men had made it was right, then anything else was right, any act man took to satisfy himself, murder, theft, torture’.¹² Although this formulation suggests nihilism (in the sense that ‘if nothing is justified, then everything is permitted’), it shows that this attitude is itself a result of ‘the world as men had made it’ or, more specifically, dominant white ideologies. Hakutani argues:

¹⁰ Richard Wright, ‘The Man Who Lived Underground’, in *Eight Stories* (Cleveland: World, 1963), pp. 27-92 (p. 92); Yoshinobu Hakutani, ‘Richard Wright’s *The Man Who Lived Underground*, Nihilism, and Zen’, *Mississippi Quarterly*, 47:2 (1994), 201-13 (p. 203).

¹¹ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin, 1965), p. 445.

¹² Wright, ‘The Man Who Lived Underground’, p. 64.

For Daniels, at least, a human action, whether it is well intended or not, has no meaning. For a person to find values in his act or in the society which has victimized the person is sheer futility. If such values should exist, Daniels argues, they should be annihilated.¹³

‘White’ nihilism created ‘black’ nihilism and black nihilism is merely the annihilation of (acting as an apocalypse upon) the earlier ‘white’ nihilism. Although both Hakutani and De Genova feel that this is a positive form of nihilism, critics such as Cornel West argue that this creates a fundamental problem within black culture itself. For West, nihilism is ‘the monumental eclipse of hope, the unprecedented collapse of meaning, the incredible disregard for human (especially black) life and property’ that comes from ‘the profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and despair so widespread in black America’.¹⁴ This results in ‘a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition towards the world’.¹⁵ Black nihilism – seen in the gang violence and misogyny of ‘gangsta rap’ – is perceived negatively by West because it perpetuates the ghettoisation of black society through its own self-destructive tendencies, however much this may be the fault of white society as a whole.

Whilst this is mostly accurate, West is mistaken in assuming ‘black’ nihilism to be solely destructive, especially in relation to Wright and Ellison. Although Ellison’s character of Ras indeed symbolises ‘a self-destructive disposition towards the world’, Ellison’s primary character, the ‘invisible man’, like Wright’s Cross Damon and Fred Daniels, moves away from ‘negative’ nihilism when he begins to avoid the simplistic opposition between black and white. In contrast to the destructive nihilism of Ras (which epitomises West’s perception

¹³ Hakutani, p. 206.

¹⁴ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage, 1994), pp. 19-20.

¹⁵ West, p. 23.

of black nihilism), the ‘invisible man’, Damon, and Daniels demonstrate an alternative form of nihilism. The ‘outside’ or ‘underground’ natures of these characters illustrate the refusal to simply react, to be a black shadow to the white-man’s light (as ‘black’ nihilism following ‘white’ nihilism indicates).

The ‘invisible man’ removes himself from the conflict between black and white, living alone underground in a room full of lights with power stolen from ‘Monopolated Light and Power’. This allegory for the Enlightenment is not simply an inversion of light/darkness but a deconstructive ‘general *displacement* of the structure itself.’¹⁶ As with the slavery/emancipation dyad symbolised by Brother Tarp’s leg irons, it is impossible ‘to think of it in terms of but two words, *yes* and *no*’ because it signifies ‘a heap more’.¹⁷ Although the ‘invisible man’ can see ‘the darkness of lightness’ and says that ‘the world moves’ by ‘contradiction’ (implicitly indicating a link between nihilism and the sublime within the Enlightenment), his decision to become invisible, rather than be made invisible by cultural forces, indicates his refusal to exist in a world of light and dark, white and black: the system is inverted and then displaced.¹⁸ Similarly, Fred Daniels moves ‘underground’, which for Hakutani symbolises a different kind of ‘enlightenment’. Rather than nihilism *per se*, Hakutani sees a form of Buddhist *satori* [self-enlightenment] through *mu* [nothingness] in Daniels’ descent:

To Daniels, forgetting the past and alienating himself from the activities of the world becomes a kind of self-reliance. It is ironic that by blinding himself to the facts of

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 329.

¹⁷ Ellison, p. 313.

¹⁸ Ellison, p. 10. This also suggests that the ‘transparent society’ is one in which Being itself becomes transparent, suggesting a positive turn of Virilio’s ‘aesthetics of disappearance’, where invisibility becomes an emancipatory condition rather than an expression of ‘pure war’. See pages 142-43 of this thesis.

society above, he seizes on a new vision of life. Living in a cave has taught him how chaotic and meaningless life on earth really is.¹⁹

It is significant that it is 'by blinding himself' that Daniels reaches a new stage of awareness. Although he is driven underground, he ceases to see in 'black and white' when removed from the society that perpetuates such reifications. 'Colour-blindness' – a form of Jay's 'ethics of blindness' – is also the solution for Cross Damon, where his exteriority from his own culture leads him to the conclusion that 'Maybe man is nothing in particular'.²⁰ Here, 'Man' is 'nothing in particular', not 'black' or 'white'. The shift away from interpellation to independence is achieved not through passive or active demonstration and protest, but through the removal/displacement of the system that perpetuates the conflict. This is apocalyptic because although it does not actively destroy the system, it, in effect, makes it nothing: a strategic use of nihilism.

Although West often miscategorises black nihilism, it does present problems, especially in relation to feminism. 'Gangsta' rap, for example, 'serves up white America's most cherished gun-slinging mythologies (heroic American dreams) in the form of its worst and blackest nightmares'.²¹ Whilst this 'empowers Black imaginations to negate the existential terror of ghetto life', it also 'too commonly aspires to the total domination and brutalization of women'.²² The apocalypse of 'black' nihilism is such that it negates not only 'white' ideologies, but also 'female' ideologies. Patriarchy is as evident in the 'postcolonial apocalypse' as it is in the dominant hegemony against which such 'apocalypses of liberation' are striving. In relation to an apocalyptic femininity, for example, there is a comparison to be

¹⁹ Hakutani, p. 212.

²⁰ Wright, *The Outsider*, p. 135. See page 92, n. 35 of this thesis.

²¹ De Genova, p. 107.

²² De Genova, pp. 107, 109.

made between texts such as Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). *The Passion of New Eve* demonstrates femininity acting in an apocalyptic manner, with a female character dancing 'a dance called the End of the World'.²³ *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, shows a different apocalypse, after which patriarchy is reinstated as the primary form of control. Where femininity is actively apocalyptic in *The Passion of New Eve*, in *The Handmaid's Tale* it is acted upon apocalyptically and remains passive, with only a small percentage of women being able to conceive and then only under the auspices of a patriarchal system of control. Whilst the rebellion indicates a desire to destroy patriarchy (act as an apocalypse upon it), this is never fully realised within *The Handmaid's Tale*. *Beloved*, in comparison to both these texts, struggles to even perform itself as a text. It is haunted by both misogyny and racism, and the ghost symbolises the difficulty in reconciling the past with the future. Without creating an artificial 'hierarchy of suffering', it is fair to say that even now, *Beloved* is a difficult text with which to deal because of the conflation of two opposing forms of repression. It is a text haunted by the absent figure of the 'beloved' where freedom cannot be realised without laying the ghosts to rest.

Returning to Berger's apocalyptic *schema*, he justifies 'apocalyptic' postmodernity in a similar fashion to both feminism and postcolonialism, because postmodern literature and theory 'consistently refer to shattering and ruptures of forms of thought, and to the absolute alterities on the far side, or within, these ruptures'.²⁴ This deals with postmodernity uncritically, giving it a uniqueness that is not altogether valid. Although postmodernity is an attempt at a radical break with previous discourses, it is still trapped within an historical

²³ Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve* (London: Virago, 1996), pp. 173-74. The apocalyptic nature of femininity and its relation to nihilism is dealt with more fully in the seventh chapter of this thesis, 'Being "Absent-Minded"', pp. 257-60.

²⁴ Berger, p. 392.

dialectic. Postmodernism may refer to ruptures, as Berger argues, but this referral does not necessarily indicate that postmodernism *is* a rupture. Whilst postmodernism argues against Enlightenment modernity, the referral to this discourse acts as a reminder of the historical origins of postmodernism: it is not a break in the chain, but another link. Postmodernism becomes the logical conclusion of the Enlightenment, the Nietzschean point at which Enlightenment values begin to devalue themselves, rather than the overcoming of modernity. Although Berger argues that postmodernism ‘may signal a forgetting of historical trauma’ it does so only because Berger himself does not historicise the postmodern.²⁵ The apocalyptic postmodern does not destroy the values of modernity, but is in fact haunted by an apocalyptic modernity, and thus does not forget historical trauma, but writes from it.

There is a significant omission in Berger’s list of apocalyptic narratives, although to justify this, the prevalence of this has only just become clear. In the last decade, a number of cinematic releases have been concerned with the apocalypse and the most common theme in these is pestilence, an idea that runs throughout apocalyptic discourse from Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) to Albert Camus’ *The Plague* (1947). What is significant about contemporary appearances of the fourth horseman, from *Twelve Monkeys* (1995) to *Resident Evil* and *28 Days Later* (both 2002), is that such appearances represent the incursion of man-made viruses into the world. The fear of a GM (Genetically-Modified) apocalypse is based upon humanity’s ability to rewrite the language of life – the genetic code – without fully understanding the implications. There are two strands to this form of apocalyptic discourse: the fear of terrorism and the fear of misguided genetic experimentation, one an intentional apocalypse, the other inadvertent (what Martin Rees calls ‘bioerror or

²⁵ Berger, p. 392.

bioterror').²⁶ The prevalence of such narratives indicates the current fear of a GM apocalypse and, more importantly, signifies the rise in awareness of the imbalance between technological advancement and moral or ecological awareness.

The significance of this form of apocalypse to literary studies is seen in the rise of ecocriticism, a form of criticism that studies 'the relationship between literature and the physical environment'.²⁷ This broad description of ecocriticism can be related to literature in a number of ways, from the landscape in which the author wrote his or her work to the representation of the physical environment within the text itself. Ecocriticism is significant in a study of apocalyptic literature because the rise of this form of criticism is predicated upon the sense that the apocalypse is imminent: 'Either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in our headlong race to apocalypse'.²⁸ Ecocriticism is therefore a form of criticism that responds to the literature of the apocalypse, arguing against the current industrial and military activities that pollute the planet. It also seeks to recuperate a meaning in a postmodern artefact, moving away from the text towards its placement and representation within a physical environment. In relation to postmodern literature, however, ecocriticism is of most use in studying the representation of the environment within the text rather than the authorial environment in which a text was written, allowing the focus to remain on the 'text', not the 'work'. Ecocriticism is an invaluable tool in assessing the figure of the postmodern apocalypse because the horizon for postmodern apocalypse is fundamentally spatial – if the

²⁶ See Martin Rees, *Our Final Century: Will the Human Race Survive the 21st Century?* (London: Heinemann, 2003).

²⁷ Cheryll Glotfelty, 'Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis', in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. xv-xxxvi (p. xviii).

²⁸ Glotfelty, p. xx.

apocalypse has already happened, then time does not exist anymore and place is the only significant aspect to apocalyptic narratives.

Another significant factor in the development of postmodern apocalyptic narratives is that apocalypse no longer acts as a signifier of a utopia to come. Traditionally, whether the apocalypse comes in the form of flood, plague, or the Antichrist, it signals a moment where one kind of world ends and the other begins, where everybody dies except for those chosen. The widespread destruction of the apocalypse is adumbrated into utopian discourse, which justifies suffering under the auspices of a future paradise. Postmodern literature, however, demonstrates a fear of the utopian rather than indicating a utopian moment following an apocalypse. This is because postmodernism uses Levinasian ethics and any utopian sentiment is automatically unethical towards the Other. The search for utopia is equivalent to ‘the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed and starved’, where the Self’s ideal space – Blaise Pascal’s ‘my place is the sun’ – exiles the Other from the utopian space.²⁹ Despite the fact that there are certainly post-war texts that demonstrate the ‘clean slate’ hypothesis of a world purged of what is unnecessary, these are not postmodern texts in anything but a chronological sense.³⁰

Such utopian apocalypses, although they may sometimes be ‘late capitalist’ discourse, cannot be postmodern. They do not demonstrate a postmodern aesthetic or ethic because they are seeking a transcendental moment in the apocalypse, whether this is an idyllic historical moment or some as yet unrealised paradise. There is no longer any transcendental

²⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Ethics as First Philosophy’, trans. by Seán Hand and Michael Temple, in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. by Seán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 75-87 (p. 82). Pascal’s statement appears in *Pensées*, trans. by A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1995): “‘That is my place in the sun.’ There is the origin and image of universal usurpation’ (§ 295 (p. 18)).

³⁰ It is important to understand here that traditional forms of utopia advocated one thing over another. Although postmodernism does this, it is an attempt to introduce diversity into the idea of utopia. Postmodernism is therefore utopian in the sense that it argues for an idealised world, but anti-utopian in that it disagrees with promoting the Self over the Other.

meaning in the apocalypse *because of the form the apocalypse takes*. There is no longer a rationale behind the apocalypse (such as ‘the will of God’) because the twentieth-century apocalypse signifies an irrational, meaningless destruction that can occur at any time, as Steve Erickson writes in *The Sea Came in at Midnight* (1999):

Sometime in the last half century [...] modern apocalypse outgrew God. Modern apocalypse was no longer about cataclysmic upheaval as related to divine revelation; modern apocalypse [...] was an explosion of time in a void of meaning, when apocalypse lost nothing less than its very faith.³¹

The postmodern apocalypse is man-made. It is not ordained by any transcendental idea, but purely by the capacity of humanity to have created the means for its own destruction that will, because the means exists, come to be realised. Postmodern literature, although haunted by apocalypse, is not the promised land of literature, but rather a response to the problem of the apocalypse. It is not a paradise, but a land built from the ruins of previous disasters, as Pynchon writes in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973): ‘Our history is an aggregate of last moments’.³² Similarly, we do not live after the apocalypse, or before it, but within it: *it is not imminent, but immanent*. Blanchot asks in *The Writing of the Disaster*, ‘Can one maintain any distance at all when Auschwitz happens? How is it possible to say: Auschwitz has happened?’.³³ This is because it remains with us as a feeling of apocalypse from which we cannot escape, a feeling of continued disaster.

³¹ Steve Erickson, *The Sea Came in at Midnight* (New York: Perennial, 2000), p. 49. Internal quotation marks have been omitted.

³² Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 149.

³³ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 143.

This demonstrates the implicit nihilism of postmodern apocalyptic narratives, which narrate not only the complete erasure of life but also the complete lack of meaning behind this erasure. These two aspects of nihilism, which might be termed ‘authoritarian’ and ‘existential’ nihilism, are joined by another form: semantic nihilism. This appears because such narratives face a unique challenge in that although they act as commentator, witnessing the disaster, they are implicated within that apocalyptic process and thus cannot ‘witness’, in the sense of either ‘observing’ or ‘attesting to’, the apocalypse at all. As a result of this, when postmodern literature deals with apocalyptic premises, it can only do so in a fragmentary manner, breaking apart distinctions of narrative form and technique in order to ‘tell the story’ of the end. This awareness of being simultaneously both witness and victim is an aspect of postmodernism that comes from Holocaust literature.

The Writing of the (Postmodern) Disaster

Postmodern literature faces many of the problems associated with Holocaust literature and those features of postmodern literature that appear in this chapter originate in the field of Holocaust writing. Postmodern literature, as that which writes the unwritable, writes in fragments, a literary form that is a result of the Holocaust. Ann Smock argues:

The ‘writing of the disaster’ means not simply the process whereby something called the disaster is written – communicated, attested to, or prophesied. It also means the writing done by the disaster – by the disaster that ruins books and wrecks language. ‘The writing of the disaster’ means the writing that the disaster – which liquidates writing – is, just as ‘knowledge of the disaster’ means knowledge *as* disaster.³⁴

³⁴ Blanchot, p. ix.

This reveals the close connection between Holocaust literature and ‘postmodern’ fiction. Blanchot’s ‘writing of the disaster’ means writing about the Holocaust, as a result of the etymological significance of disaster as the ‘unfavourable aspect of a star’ and the requirement, under National Socialism, that all of Jewish descent wear yellow stars. Furthermore, it also refers to the possibility of writing *after* the disaster, and the way in which this is made difficult, if not impossible. Thus, ‘the writing of the disaster’ is also ‘the disaster of writing’. Postmodern apocalyptic fictions must deal simultaneously with the act of witnessing the disaster and its aftermath, and with the impossibility of doing so. The emergence of postmodern narratives from the Holocaust is directly indicative of the way in which the Holocaust informs postmodern literature of the apocalypse.

One such example is Paul Auster’s *In The Country of Last Things* (1987), in which the reader follows Anna Blume’s journey to find her brother, William. The eponymous country is both foreign and familiar to Anna. Concepts of rich and poor, kindness and greed, still exist in this place, and the difference is only in magnitude – the gap between dichotomies is both insurmountable and finer than in the ‘real’ world. This country is an example of that which is *unheimlich* [uncanny] – strange yet familiar, infinitely disturbing – and Anna’s journey through the city is simultaneously a journey through a foreign city, an exploration of the ‘underside’ of any metropolis, and a journey through her own consciousness. The relation of *In The Country of Last Things* to the Holocaust is emphasised when we see how Auster himself intended this text:

My private working subtitle for the book was ‘Anna Blume Walks Through the 20th Century.’ I feel that it’s very much a book about our own moment, our own era [...]

The country Anna goes to might not be immediately recognizable, but I feel that this is where we live.³⁵

The Holocaust, that ‘disaster of writing’, did not end with the liberation of the camps, but remained in spirit throughout the twentieth century. It is the *feeling* of continued ‘disaster’ that informs *In The Country of Last Things*, and seeing it as a ‘Holocaust’ text lends a new light to certain passages, such as the metaphor of the ‘Transformation Centers’, the organised persecution of religious groups, and the rumours of ‘human slaughterhouses’.³⁶ As Anna tries to escape from the city, she writes: ‘Entrances do not become exits’.³⁷ This entrance to the city could almost read ‘*Arbeit Macht Frei?* [Work brings Freedom], the legend above the entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp, which is true in only the most perverted way.’³⁸

The parallels between Auster’s postmodern city and concentration camps are also seen in the ‘grey zone’ that, according to Primo Levi, defined life in the camps: ‘It is a grey zone, with ill-defined outlines which both separate and join the two camps of masters and servants. It possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure, and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge’.³⁹ The ‘grey zone’ is the location of moral ambiguity in which those who survive are not the most morally pure, and we hear considerable guilt in Levi’s voice when he writes that ‘The worst survived – that is, the fittest; the best all died’.⁴⁰

³⁵ Paul Auster, ‘Interview with Joseph Mallia’, in *The Art of Hunger: Essays, Prefaces, Interviews & The Red Notebook* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), pp. 274-86 (pp. 284-85).

³⁶ Paul Auster, *In The Country of Last Things* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), pp. 17, 125.

³⁷ Auster, *In The Country of Last Things*, p. 85.

³⁸ Primo Levi, *If This is a Man*, collected in *If This is a Man · The Truce*, trans. by Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 2000), p. 28.

³⁹ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. by Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1988), p. 27.

⁴⁰ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 63.

Anna's inhabitation of this zone is revealed when she states that 'We have all become monsters', approaching what Sven Birkerts calls 'moral extinction'.⁴¹

The act of bearing witness, an element of most texts concerned with the Holocaust, is also an implicit aspect of Anna's journey through the city. She writes that 'Slowly and steadily, the city seems to be consuming itself, even as it remains. There is no way to explain it. I can only record, I cannot pretend to understand'.⁴² This act of witnessing is one of the most significant aspects of *In The Country of Last Things* because it reveals the way in which this disaster is to be communicated. The text ends with the close of Anna's letter, a communication that is deeply ambiguous, despite Dennis Barone's 'redemptive' reading:

Anna does succeed, her message does get through. We know that it has because the novel is actually told in a third-person narration. Someone has received Anna's story-as-letter, had read it, and, in turn, is now telling Anna's story to us. This is a story of triumph, not of disintegration.⁴³

This is remarkably naïve, for in this respect Holocaust literature is redemptive because it is read whether the author died or not. This is troubling because it suggests that, just as the Holocaust can be 'justified' in the sense of the Hegelian 'spirit of history' (it eventually brought about the United Nations and international conventions on human rights), there is some meaning to be gained from the Holocaust, some hidden value that justifies its occurrence. This is a dangerous path to tread and in relation to *In the Country of Last Things* misses elements of the text. Firstly, there is the case of the desert that surrounds the city,

⁴¹ Auster, *In The Country of Last Things*, p. 20; Sven Birkerts, 'Reality, Fiction, and *In the Country of Last Things*', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 14:1 (1994), 66-69 (p. 68). This aspect of moral decline is important in relation to the literature of the Holocaust, but in relation to postmodern fiction will be dealt with in the seventh chapter of this thesis, 'Being "Absent-Minded"'.
⁴² Auster, *In The Country of Last Things*, pp. 21-22.
⁴³ Dennis Barone, 'Introduction: Auster and the Postmodern Novel', in *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*, ed. by Dennis Barone (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 1-26 (p. 8).

reminding the reader that Anna is leaving one form of blankness for another.⁴⁴ Secondly, there is also the fact that this letter symbolises not the triumph of communication but its failure: we read the words but we do not understand (a prefix attached to all Holocaust literature); the letter has arrived but its meaning, evidently, has not.

In the novel, it is a *trace* of Anna that reaches us, not Anna herself. It is a letter that has no sequel, despite the closing promise that, ‘Once we get where we’re going, I will write to you again, I promise’.⁴⁵ She has deserted us by entering the desert, entered the silence where we cannot follow, and we cannot understand. She may be dead, or may only have disappeared, but she has gone beyond where the ‘I’ may go: ‘the disaster would be beyond what we understand by death or abyss, or in any case by my death, since there is no more place for “me”: in the disaster I disappear without dying (or die without disappearing)’.⁴⁶ This is made more disturbing by the fact that we may soon understand all too well what this means: she writes that trying to communicate with the recipient of the letter feels like ‘calling into blankness, like screaming into a vast and terrible blankness’.⁴⁷ It is a cry from one form of emptiness to another, and this points to the conflation of ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ that is so emblematic of the fact that this text is an allegory for the world *as it is*. If the city is merely an altered New York City, then she is crying from *our* world, not one separated from ours, and we inhabit that blankness with her. The text represents a ‘domestic holocaust’ because it shows the unbridgeable gap between two inhabitants of the same reality, as Auster writes: ‘we all speak our own language of ghosts, I’m afraid’.⁴⁸ Thus, the text does not have a

⁴⁴ See Auster, *In The Country of Last Things*, pp. 39-40. This also alludes to the desert/city corollary of Baudrillard’s ‘desertification’, discussed later in this chapter.

⁴⁵ Auster, *In The Country of Last Things*, p. 188.

⁴⁶ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 119.

⁴⁷ Auster, *In The Country of Last Things*, p. 183.

⁴⁸ James R. Giles, *Violence in the Contemporary American Novel: An End to Innocence* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), p. 133; Auster, *In The Country of Last Things*, p. 155.

triumphant ending, but an ambiguous one, even more disturbing because we never fully incorporate it into our consciousness.

Although *In The Country of Last Things* deals primarily with the Holocaust, it is not the only postmodern text to do so. Adorno, for example, sees in the works of Samuel Beckett a form of Holocaust literature:

Beckett has given us the only fitting reaction to the situation of the concentration camps – a situation he never calls by name, as if it were subject to an image ban. What is, he says, is like a concentration camp.⁴⁹

Beckett's works never explicitly mention the Holocaust, despite the fact that they are implicitly concerned with writing 'after' it. Adorno's argument indicates the extent to which postmodern literature is indebted to the Holocaust (in the sense of a Levinasian *mauvaise conscience*), because everything that is 'is like a concentration camp'. There is no 'after' the Holocaust, but only a living around it. Pynchon, in *V* (1963), refers to this aspect of Holocaust:

Now remember, right after the war, the Nuremberg war trials? Remember the photographs of Auschwitz? Thousands of Jewish corpses, stacked up like those poor car bodies. Schlemihl: It's already started. [...] Has it occurred to you there may be no more standards for crazy or sane, now that it's started?⁵⁰

Where the Holocaust 'has started', it has not finished, and because of it 'there may be no more standards for crazy or sane'. This signifies an implicit response to the Holocaust within

⁴⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 380.

⁵⁰ Thomas Pynchon, *V* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 295.

postmodern literature, where the feeling of continued apocalypse, in the guise of the Holocaust, bleeds into other discourses. For example, in relation to the genre of 'blank fiction', Tama Janowitz describes a character as 'a nervous little thing, with those concentration-camp eyes popping out of a rich American face'.⁵¹ Similarly, in Jay McInerney's *Model Behaviour* (1998), someone with anorexia is described as looking 'like you've been at Auschwitz'.⁵² Janowitz's juxtaposition of these two disparate adjectives, 'concentration-camp' and 'rich American', and McInerney's use of Auschwitz as an adjective to describe anorexia, demonstrates the continued feeling of the Holocaust as a defining moment of twentieth-century existence. Although its use as an adjective may offend, this shows the extent to which the Holocaust is central to the genre of 'blank fiction'.

The Holocaust also serves as a metaphor within other formulations of the apocalypse, where the events of the Holocaust are sublimated within another variety of apocalyptic discourse. In Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, for example, the narrator talks about watching old television interviews:

The one I remember best was with a woman who had been the mistress of a man who had supervised one of the camps where they put the Jews, before they killed them. In ovens, my mother said; but there weren't any pictures of the ovens, so I got some confused notion that these deaths had taken place in kitchens. There is something especially terrifying to a child in that idea. Ovens mean cooking, and cooking comes before eating. I thought that these people had been eaten. Which in a way I suppose they had been.⁵³

Here, the Holocaust is configured in terms of the domestic sphere, with the 'ovens' cooking people to be eaten (the idea of being eaten also indicating the Roma term for the Holocaust

⁵¹ Tama Janowitz, 'Turkey Talk', in *Slaves of New York* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), pp. 102-18 (p. 114).

⁵² Jay McInerney, *Model Behaviour* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), p. 149.

⁵³ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 155.

– *Porraimos* [Devouring]).⁵⁴ This prefigures the ‘domestic holocaust’ at the heart of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where all prior freedoms of women are subverted by the apocalypse. Similarly, just as Atwood uses the Holocaust as an allegory for the connection between femininity and apocalypse, J. G. Ballard uses it as an allegory for nuclear war in ‘The Terminal Beach’ (1964), when concrete monoliths used to monitor nuclear explosions evoke ‘an Auschwitz of the soul’.⁵⁵ Thus, the Holocaust is not only a strict historical term, but also a generic adjective for apocalypse within the postmodern world.

Postmodernism’s preoccupation with the Holocaust is not a morbid fascination with death, but a result of its own ethical preoccupations. This ethical concern (one might say *mauvaise conscience*) is seen in texts such as Erickson’s *Tours of the Black Clock* (1989). In this text, Erickson addresses the issue of evil in the twentieth century through the standpoint of potential realities. Two realities exist in *Tours of the Black Clock*, one the narrator’s and the second our own. The point of the divergence is Operation Barbarossa (the planned invasion of Russia), which in the narrator’s reality was stopped, leading to the dominion of National Socialism around the world. Our reality is initially proposed as the triumph of good, as the narrator says:

This Twentieth Century I saw from my own window today was the one in which [...] no evil mind was ever distracted by the reincarnation of a past obsession, no Barbarossas were suspended and therefore evil came to rule the world; or else such suspended invasions were the catastrophe Holtz predicted, and therefore evil collapsed altogether. I longed for this century, seeing it from my window, because I was absolved in it of some of my monstrousness.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ See Inga Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 8.

⁵⁵ J. G. Ballard, ‘The Terminal Beach’, in *The Complete Short Stories* (London: Flamingo, 2002), pp. 589-604 (p. 590).

⁵⁶ Steve Erickson, *Tours of the Black Clock* (London: Futura, 1990), p. 168.

Evil did not win the war, but ‘collapsed altogether’. This does not change the fact that the Holocaust occurred in our reality and does not absolve us from responsibility: it does not mean that our Century is ‘better’. Rather, our Twentieth Century is just as bad. We have less guilt and less understanding of what we have done than the narrator of *Tours of the Black Clock* does. We live in the century of alternate atrocities ‘from Warsaw to London, from Treblinka to Mauthausen’, and we were all perpetrators, not just one man.⁵⁷ Evil does not have to take the form of the devil to be evil and can be cloaked in a number of guises:

I struck down his evil no matter what name it took for itself, no matter that it called itself history or revolution, America or the Son of God, no matter that it called itself righteous, a righteousness that presumed the license to bind the free word and thought.⁵⁸

Erickson’s narrative enables us to perceive the inherent ambiguity of our own century, one in which in the name of righteousness millions have died, when this righteousness is merely another name for control, for dominion, for determinism. Erickson’s apocalyptic narrative tells us that despite the defeat of National Socialism, evil is not eradicated in our century, because other evils were committed in the name of righteousness, most notably the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by atomic weaponry. Erickson’s summary of the latter stages of the Second World War is telling, as he covers the war and its aftermath in four separate chapters:

1943.

1944.

⁵⁷ Erickson, *Tours of the Black Clock*, p. 256.

⁵⁸ Erickson, *Tours of the Black Clock*, p. 306.

1945. I can see the smoke.

1946.⁵⁹

The only year worthy of attention here is 1945 and this ‘smoke’ could refer to the lingering smoke from the camp chimneys or, in Erickson’s usually ambivalent manner, the fire-bombing of Dresden by the Allies on the 13-14 February, visible from the narrator’s own Century. However, it is more likely to refer to both of these *and* the smoke from the ‘mushroom clouds’ over Hiroshima (6 August) and Nagasaki (9 August). 1945 was, in many ways, the Year of Smoke. The very fact that the narrator can see this smoke from his Century suggests the cataclysmic importance of the event, and suggests that the ‘nuclear’ is an important element in the writing of the postmodern apocalypse.

Nuclear Criticism and Nuclear Writing

One of the most significant developments in twentieth-century warfare was the ability to instantaneously vaporise entire cities using atomic bombs. This stands as one of the most significant events in human history purely because it demonstrates the ability of humanity to instantly wipe itself, and a significant proportion of other species, from the face of the planet – something that had never been ‘achieved’ before. This uniqueness is realised by Derrida, who argues:

Unlike the other wars, which have all been preceded by wars of more or less the same type in human memory (and gunpowder did not mark a radical break in this respect), nuclear war has no precedent. It has never occurred, itself; it is a non-event. The

⁵⁹ Erickson, *Tours of the Black Clock*, p. 180.

explosion of American bombs in 1945 ended a 'classical,' conventional war; it did not set off a nuclear war.⁶⁰

'Nuclear warfare' cannot be categorised as 'warfare', because of the sheer scale of 'collateral damage' possible. It also does not necessarily matter who drops the bomb, because if it triggers a reaction from another nation with a 'nuclear capability', the resulting 'nuclear winter' has the potential to eradicate all life on earth. Just as Blanchot argues that the Holocaust cannot happen to people (because they cease to be people during the Holocaust), Derrida argues that nuclear war cannot happen because to do so would annihilate its very reason for existence – you cannot win a war if you are dead. Nuclear catastrophe is significant in terms of nihilism because the Nuclear Age symbolises the possibility of complete destruction, the absolute reduction of everything to zero, as well as the fact that writing about a 'non-event' is writing about an absence that cannot be realised without destroying literature itself, as Derrida continues:

The only 'subject' of all possible literature, of all possible criticism, its only ultimate and a-symbolic referent, unsymbolizable, even unsignifiable; this is, if not the nuclear age, if not the nuclear catastrophe, at least that toward which nuclear discourse and the nuclear symbolic are *still beckoning*: the remainderless and a-symbolic destruction of literature.⁶¹

Nuclear writing is concerned not only with the destruction of the human race, but also with the destruction of writing itself. The fields of literature and criticism, as the network of interlinked nodes of textual consciousness, disappear. With no field, there are only those few discrete nodes (individual texts and criticism) that may remain, although without referents,

⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives)', *Diacritics*, 14:2 (1984), 20-31 (p. 23).

⁶¹ Derrida, p. 28.

these texts are meaningless. Nuclear criticism breaks the chain of signification, seen in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, where a newspaper declares: 'MB DRO / ROSHI'.⁶² Although this probably means 'ATOM BOMB DROPPED ON HIROSHIMA', the reader can never be sure. The network that enables the creation of plausible meaning (the sentence) has been removed, and the discrete elements (the letters) no longer make any kind of sense.

According to Ballard, this nuclear potential signifies a new stage of human existence, epitomised by 'the tomb of the unknown civilian, *Homo hydrogenensis*, Eniwetok Man'.⁶³ This encapsulates the idea of the destruction of society, highlighting the 'unknown' aspect of modern warfare, because there are too many 'civilian', not just military, casualties to identify. The emphasis is placed very much upon the 'unknown', in the sense of 'without name':

As it is in the name of something whose name, in this logic of total destruction, can no longer be borne, transmitted, inherited by anything living, that name in the name of which total war would take place would be the name of nothing, it would be pure name, the 'naked name.' That war would be the first and last war in the name of the name, with only the non-name of 'name.' [...] That would be the End and the Revelation of the name itself, the Apocalypse of the Name.⁶⁴

Although Derrida refers to the fact that nuclear war cannot happen in anyone's name, it does highlight the fact that 'nuclear holocaust' is essentially the 'Apocalypse of the Name'. All names are obliterated, even the name that instigates the nuclear catastrophe. The only possible name for that event would be 'nihilism'; the only name in which complete destruction could be carried out and the only name that undermines its own name-ness.

⁶² Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, p. 693.

⁶³ Ballard, 'The Terminal Beach', p. 599. 'Eniwetok' is the name of an atoll where 'Operation Ivy' – the first thermonuclear test – was carried out on the 1 November 1952 and appears frequently in Ballard's short stories.

⁶⁴ Derrida, pp. 30-31.

In Erickson's *Tours of the Black Clock*, the revelation of the nuclear is the destruction of place and time. The 'Black Clock', the timekeeper of the twentieth century in the text, is itself destroyed:

Neither the rule of evil nor its collapse could be anything but an aberration in such a century, because this is the century in which another German, small with wild white hair, has written away with his new wild poetry every Absolute; in which the black clock of the century is stripped of hands and numbers. A time in which there is no measure of time that God understands: in such a time memories mean nothing but the fever that invents them.⁶⁵

This is *our* Century, in which the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This atrocity of our Century recurs throughout *Tours of the Black Clock*, such as when the narrator describes the negligible feeling of guilt at killing his father:

It's like a man atomizing into nothingness hundreds of thousands of men and women and children, maybe in a little city somewhere, maybe in Japan, maybe two little cities in Japan, maybe in the name of something righteous, maybe in the name of ending some larger barbarism, but then claiming he *never* has a moment's doubt about it, never loses a moment's sleep. Never in the dark does he see a face or hear a voice calling him. But then, that happened in *your* Twentieth Century. Not mine.⁶⁶

In the name of righteousness – in the name of stopping the war early – the bombs were dropped. This harks back to the ethical dilemma that Erickson places before us throughout *Tours of the Black Clock*: what is right? what is justified? Such questions illustrate the dangers involved in the destructive potential of nuclear weapons. The fact that they may be perceived

⁶⁵ Erickson, *Tours of the Black Clock*, p. 168.

⁶⁶ Erickson, *Tours of the Black Clock*, pp. 79-80.

as an ‘easy’ solution to diplomacy by some indicates the extent to which nuclear apocalypse is implicit in late-twentieth-century fiction.

The demonstration of this nuclear destruction delineates the differences between modernist and postmodern versions of the apocalypse, typified by the relation between Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979). In *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz writes ‘Exterminate all the brutes!’, signifying a white colonial approach to apocalypse, a utopian ideal of colonising Africa and exterminating the savages.⁶⁷ In *Apocalypse Now*, however, the presentation of destruction is not extermination in the name of capitalism, but complete eradication of the Other (and the Self) for no reason: ‘Drop the Bomb!’.⁶⁸ There is no intended target here, no ‘brutes’ to be exterminated, but merely the fact of destruction, the act of using technology because it exists. Although Coppola’s version highlights the colonial aspects of the Vietnam ‘war’, it is not clear from this statement whether the bomb should be dropped on the jungle or on Washington, and indicates an ambivalence about its use. Some films go further than merely the threat of the nuclear, however, into its revelation, such as Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1963), which goes so far as to actually drop the bomb. Such representations demonstrate that potential itself can lead to revelation (in the sense of an apocalyptic unveiling of potential).

For the moment, however, nuclear apocalypse remains only a potential. As a potential, its field is predominantly textual, as William Chaloupka argues. He notes that, for some critics “The nuke implies a prospect for such thorough annihilation that it is “unspeakable,” an image of future negation so total as to illuminate a sort of new, negative totality on which

⁶⁷ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. by Robert Hampson (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 83.

⁶⁸ *Apocalypse Now*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Paramount. 1979.

to base political action'.⁶⁹ Barry Cooper, for example, observes that 'Nuclear weapons do not simply destroy things, they destroy the boundaries between destruction and non-destruction'.⁷⁰ Despite this, nuclear criticism functions because the nuclear is 'fabulously textual' and not a reality. Revelations of the nuclear within discourse (such as *Dr Strangelove*) actually expose its textuality because its true revelation would destroy textuality itself. The nuclear exposes our inability to understand the nuclear, because although we can understand the code (the text), we cannot understand what that code accomplishes (the reality). It is a modulation of the sublime: we can rationally understand, through mathematics, the logistics of the bomb's make-up, but we can never imagine its effects. We can begin to calculate damage, working out who will die and who will not, who has a high probability of radiation sickness, who will probably survive. What we cannot comprehend is the scale of destruction or the sheer amounts of energy released – it is beyond our rational ability to imagine the nuclear. This presentation of the nuclear is equivalent to the connection between nihilism and the sublime. The euphemistic 'Ground Zero' of a nuclear explosion is as much about nihilism as it is a mathematical measure of range; the splitting of the unitary atom is equivalent to its reduction to nothingness. Just as nuclear apocalypse is nihilistic, it is also sublime:

The notion of the sublime is continuous with the notion of nuclear holocaust: to think the sublime would be to think the unthinkable and to exist in one's own non-existence [...The] effort to think the nuclear sublime in terms of its absoluteness dwindles from the effort to imagine total annihilation to something very much like the calculations of exactly how horrible daily life would be after a significant nuclear explosion.⁷¹

⁶⁹ William Chaloupka, *Knowing Nukes: The Politics and Culture of the Atom* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 8.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Chaloupka, p. 8. The original source is Barry Cooper, 'The Meaning of Technology at the End of History', *University of Minnesota Center for Humanistic Studies Occasional Papers*, 7 (1986), p. 23.

⁷¹ Frances Ferguson, 'The Nuclear Sublime', *Diacritics*, 14:2 (1984), 4-10 (p. 7)

In this analysis, we can see the manner in which nihilism and the sublime are again conflated within postmodernism. Nihilism, seen here as the complete meaningless destruction of the totality, becomes the feeling of existing ‘in one’s own non-existence’ within the sublime. The nuclear also indicates another feature of the postmodern apocalypse at this point, because it forces us to imagine how we locate ourselves in our own non-existence – where we are when there is no longer anywhere to live. The most common feature of this sense of apocalypse is seen in postmodern representations of the desert – the place where we cannot live.

The Apocalyptic Desert

The image of the blank desert pervades most of the postmodern ‘literature of the end’ in a number of different ways, from the desert that is created as a result of nuclear holocaust or pollution, to the desert that appears in conjunction with the disappearance of the human and the destruction of meaning. The ‘meaning’ of the desert has thus shifted from the benign image of a place of introspection towards a more malign environment in which the apocalypse has already happened. The use of the desert in *The Passion of New Eve* is indicative of this, as Carter uses the desert as a place of introspection:

I would go to the desert, to the waste heart of that vast country, the desert on which they turned their backs for fear it would remind them of emptiness – the desert, the arid zone, there to find, chimera of chimeras, there, in the ocean of sand, among the bleached rocks of the untenanted part of the world, I thought I might find that most elusive of all chimeras, myself.⁷²

⁷² Carter, p. 38.

This initial aim of ‘finding yourself’ in the desert – as with Christ’s forty days and forty nights – is subverted by the inability of life to survive there:

I am helplessly lost in the middle of the desert, without map or guide or compass. The landscape unfurls around me like an old fan that has lost all its painted silk and left only the bare, yellowed sticks of antique ivory in a world which, since I am alive, I have no business. The earth has been scalped, flayed; it is peopled only with echoes. The world shines and glistens, reeks and swelters till its skin peels, flakes, cracks, blisters.⁷³

Although Evelyn attempts to find himself, he begins to die (and indeed symbolically dies later in the text) – the desert is apocalyptic. It is a landscape at the end of the world, at the extremes of human existence and throughout postmodern fiction can be either the result of the apocalypse or its cause.

The first representation of the desert is the appearance of the desert because of an apocalypse. This apocalypse is normally configured as a result of pollution or nuclear warfare. Ballard’s *The Drought* (1965), for example, deals explicitly with the desert-ed landscape, although what is most significant is the cause of this drought:

Covering the off-shore waters of the world’s oceans, to a distance of about a thousand miles off the coast, was a thin but resilient mono-molecular film formed from a complex of saturated long-chain polymers, generated within the sea from the vast quantities of industrial wastes discharged into the ocean basins during the previous fifty years. This tough, oxygen-permeable membrane lay on the air-water interface and prevented almost all evaporation of surface water into the air space above.⁷⁴

The alteration of the planet into a global desert is a direct result of environmental pollution, although there are a number of separate elements that comprise this apocalyptic drought.

⁷³ Carter, p. 41.

⁷⁴ J. G. Ballard, *The Drought* (London: Flamingo, 2002), p. 36.

Firstly, water molecules cannot move into the atmosphere, suggesting an enforced cessation of ecosystem activity, as the movement integral to a successful biosphere is halted. The drought is created by the shift from *eco-system* to *eco-stasis*. Secondly, the scientific terminology – ‘mono-molecular film’, ‘saturated long-chain polymers’, ‘oxygen-permeable membrane’ – suggests the ‘language’ of organic chemistry, although this language cannot effectively control that which it explains. Thirdly, this drought is caused by human interference, as the film is generated by ‘vast quantities of industrial waste’. Ballard suggests that science created the problem and science understands the problem, but that science cannot solve the problem: the desert is primarily a man-made apocalypse. Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* also features this representation of the desert, with mass infertility being caused by environmental pollution:

The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells. Who knows, your very flesh may be polluted, dirty as an oily beach, sure death to shore birds and unborn babies.⁷⁵

Here, the (female) body is implicitly compared to the (deserted) landscape. Throughout *The Handmaid’s Tale*, there is a direct corollary between the human body and the earth, a ‘Mother Earth’ hypothesis, where the world-body is made infertile by pollution. We can also note the occurrence of the word ‘beach’ here, suggesting infertility, which is mirrored when Atwood writes that ‘The body is so easily damaged, so easily disposed of, water and chemicals is all it is, hardly more to it than a jellyfish, drying on sand’.⁷⁶ Not only is the ‘body’ of the world

⁷⁵ Atwood, p. 122.

⁷⁶ Atwood, p. 115.

easily damaged, but it is the sand upon which the body dies – the world is the sand under the human-jellyfish, and yet also that jellyfish dying on the sand.

Such representations are nihilistic because they conflate two formulations of the apocalypse in terms of nihilism. The first is the desert-ed landscape, which demonstrates the complete absence of all life. This – the eradication of all planetary life – is an apocalyptic nihilism in which everything is made nothing. The second aspect of nihilism that appears here is technological nihilism, in which Nature and Technology are opposed to one another, and Technology seeks to annihilate Nature: ‘technology does nothing. To be more precise, it dissolves the world while understanding the dissolution of the world as its transformation. Sometimes this is called progress’.⁷⁷ These aspects of nihilism signify ‘ecological nihilism’ or ‘ecocide’ – the complete destruction of an ecosystem. This term is especially ironic given that humanity is committing ecocide on its own planet (and therefore itself) in both *The Drought* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

These formulations of nihilism also appear in another representation of the desert that is fundamentally similar to the creation of the desert by pollution: the nuclear desert. This desert is created by nuclear detonations, and can be categorised as ecological nihilism because it annihilates all life and is created by the application of Technology at the expense of Nature.⁷⁸ The nuclear desert is represented in two ways, one by habit, the second by causality. To explain this distinction, it must be realised that the majority of nuclear testing was conducted on remote island atolls such as Eniwetok and Bikini. These atolls are essentially torus-shaped beaches, and were felt to be ‘safe’ nuclear testing grounds because

⁷⁷ Barry Cooper, ‘Nihilism and Technology’, in *Nietzsche and the Rhetoric of Nihilism: Essays on Interpretation, Language and Politics*, ed. by Tom Darby, Béla Egged, and Ben Jones (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1989), pp. 165-81 (p. 166).

⁷⁸ *The Handmaid’s Tale* also indicates the nuclear (although as pollution, not warfare) as the cause of the desert: ‘the exploding atomic power plants, along the San Andreas fault’ (Atwood, p. 122).

they were far removed from the majority of human activity on Earth. This is an *habitual* association between the desert and the nuclear. Furthermore, in the aftermath of a nuclear test, radiation kills all surrounding living things that survive the immediate blast. Flora and fauna turn into desert and so the desert comes to represent the nuclear through a metonymic association in which the attribute (the result of the detonation) stands for the whole (the nuclear). Ballard's use of the nuclear desert emphasises not only ecological nihilism, but also the difficulty of reading this environment: 'Above him, along the crests of the dunes, the tall palms leaned into the dim air like the symbols of some cryptic alphabet. The landscape of the island was covered by strange ciphers'.⁷⁹ Humanity cannot understand the nuclear desert because it is an anathema to them. The tall palms, later revealed to be 'anaemic' as a result of the testing, symbolise the impossibility of attributing meaning or sense in this desert.⁸⁰

The second representation of the desert indicates that the desert itself is an apocalypse. Rather than being a result of an apocalypse, this desert acts apocalyptically, mirroring or even instigating the apocalypse. This apocalyptic nature of the landscape is clear in Erickson's *Days Between Stations* (1985), where dense sandstorms slowly cover Los Angeles. These sandstorms get steadily worse as the text progresses and, with each weather front, a little more of the city is eroded:

The second sandstorm arrived. It was closer to the ground, and while it wasn't as long as the first it bombarded everything violently; the next morning, in its aftermath, the streets were ranges of sand, sloped against doorways and all but burying the first levels of buildings.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Ballard, 'The Terminal Beach', p. 589.

⁸⁰ Ballard, 'The Terminal Beach', p. 590.

⁸¹ Steve Erickson, *Days Between Stations* (London: Quartet, 1997), pp. 68-69.

This is not the gradual eroding of the city from within, as is seen in Auster's *In the Country of Last Things*, but a complete onslaught of nature against human occupation. Where Los Angeles has sandstorms, Paris has extreme cold:

All across the city, as seen from her balcony, structures jutted up before her like jagged canyon peaks, honeycombed with caverns where fire burned. Fires burned in the streets; every once in a while she would catch the sight of some flames flickering around some corner or from beyond some rooftop. Primordial Paris: empty, frozen, infernal, undetermined inhabitants scurrying through its subterranean passages, the increasingly panicked sounds of more furniture broken to feed the fires, the crackling of more pages igniting, more incinerated momentos.⁸²

These extreme weather conditions affect the structures of buildings and human civilisation. Los Angeles sees the destruction of law and order as the façade of civilisation is encroached upon by the sand, 'burying the first levels of buildings'. In Paris, the cold forces the architecture of the city to change and humanity scurries underground, burning its heritage to survive: 'Certain structures were deemed expendable and unnecessary, including theaters, monuments, museums, certain very fashionable shops, synagogues, and, for some, the homes of the rich'.⁸³ Those structures that exemplify communal culture and history, the very founding stones of civilisation, are the first things to disappear when civilisation is under duress. By specifying 'synagogues' (and not religious sites more generally), Erickson also demonstrates that the 'Jews', those somehow 'outside' society, are also targeted, which again emphasises the continued feeling of the Holocaust in the apocalyptic desert.

These extreme forces of nature show us the order in which identity (being) is lost. First, the structures exemplifying society are destroyed; second, the structure of society itself

⁸² Erickson, *Days Between Stations*, p. 173.

⁸³ Erickson, *Days Between Stations*, p. 176.

is lost; finally, as typified by Lauren walking through the dried-up Mediterranean seabed naked, it is our own identities.⁸⁴ The ‘desert’ is therefore symbolic of the traditional formation of a desert (heat, sand, and the ‘absence’ or harshness of life) as well as symbolises ‘Being-deserted’. Paris is as much of a desert as Los Angeles in Erickson’s estimation, but it is the mental construction of a desert rather than its physical reality, as Lee Spinks observes: ‘Erickson suggests that American identity is always involved in a reciprocal relationship with apocalypse, death, or an experience of the *limit* that these terms represent’.⁸⁵ Although Spinks’ observation is restricted to the ‘American identity’), it shows the extent to which the human psyche is conditioned by the apocalyptic desert.

These formulations of the desert suggest Baudrillard’s *America*, in which a desert is an environment in which no meaning exists. Although he (over)emphasises the psychological impact of the desert upon American culture, he demonstrates a comparable experience between the desert and the urban landscape: there is no meaning in either. Baudrillard writes:

No desire: the desert. Desire is still something deeply natural, we live off its vestiges in Europe, and off the vestiges of a moribund critical culture. Here the cities are mobile deserts. No monuments and no history: the exaltation of mobile deserts and simulation. There is the same wildness in the endless, indifferent cities as in the intact silence of the Badlands. Why is LA, why are deserts so fascinating? It is because you are delivered from all depth there – a brilliant, mobile, superficial neutrality, a challenge to meaning and profundity, a challenge to nature and culture, an outer hyperspace, with no origin, no reference points.⁸⁶

Cities, like the desert, deliver you ‘from all depth’. Although we could assume in relation to texts such as Auster’s *In the Country of Last Things* that the city is contrasted with the desert,

⁸⁴ See Erickson, *Days Between Stations*, p. 205.

⁸⁵ Lee Spinks, ‘Jefferson at the Millennial Gates: History and Apocalypse in the Fiction of Steve Erickson’, *Contemporary Literature*, 40:2 (1999), 214-39 (p. 220).

⁸⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 123-24.

this is not the case: the desert is the city and the city is the desert. Both symbolise the apocalypse in terms of a desertion of meaning. The image of the desert is not merely the absence of the human or the absence of life (which would be false as deserts have their own ecosystems), ‘a challenge to nature and culture’, but is also the absence of any potential for meaning, ‘a brilliant, mobile, superficial neutrality’ and ‘a challenge to meaning and profundity’.

This process of ‘desertification’, as Baudrillard defines it, implies the loss of meaning within cities and the natural environment. This is nihilism in the sense that there is no meaning to be found – meaning has deserted us and there is no longer any reality. It is an example Baudrillard’s ‘hyperreal’. However, as Baudrillard notes, the desert is also sublime:

The desert is a sublime form that banishes all sociality, all sentimentality, all sexuality. Words, even when they speak of the desert, are always unwelcome [...] *Nothing dreams here, nothing talks in its sleep*. Each night the earth plunges into perfectly calm darkness, into the blackness of its alkaline gestation, into the happy depression of its birth.⁸⁷ (My emphasis)

The desert is sublime because of nihilism – the puckish nothingness that sleeps within the desert. It is a sublime hyperreal, but it is also nihilistic because of the absence ‘present’ within it. This perception of the desert as a nihilistic form of the sublime indicates again the conflation of nihilism and the sublime within postmodern literature, although it is no longer in the sense of *destruction* (as was the case with the nuclear sublime) but with *lack*, more specifically, the lack of meaning.

⁸⁷ Baudrillard, *America*, p. 71.

The absence of meaning in the desert is one that forces humanity to create meaning when in the desert. Pynchon's analysis of this human response is telling: 'We are obsessed with building labyrinths, where before there was open plain and sky. To draw ever more complex patterns on the blank sheet. We cannot abide that *openness*: it is terror to us. Look at Borges'.⁸⁸ The response to the desert is to construct meaning: in the face of *absence*, we desire *presence*. The act of drawing 'ever more complex patterns on a blank sheet' is tantamount to placing a meaning on that which has no meaning. If we follow Pynchon's imperative, this suggests stories such as 'The Circular Ruins' or 'The Garden of Forking Paths' (both 1941). Here, we see that Borges' stories are artificial, in the sense that they are the product of literary artifice. The reason for this artifice is to construct meaning where there is none. For example, 'The Circular Ruins' concludes with the author being 'but appearance' and realising 'that another man was dreaming him', suggesting that everybody is actually a dream of somebody else.⁸⁹ There is nothing 'true' and everything is dreamt. Pynchon's response to this is seen in *V*:

But the desert, or the row of false shop fronts; a forge where fires are banked, these and the street and the dreamer, only an inconsequential shadow himself in the landscape, partaking of the soullessness of these other masses and shadows; this is the 20th Century nightmare.⁹⁰

Borges' playful dream mutates within Pynchon's fiction as a surreal nightmare. Likewise, one of Borges' most famous stories, 'The Garden of Forking Paths', is about a text of that name that represents the entire universe. As a result, the text is 'a labyrinth in which all men would

⁸⁸ Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, p. 264.

⁸⁹ Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Circular Ruins', in *Collected Fictions*, trans. by Andrew Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), pp. 96-100 (p. 100).

⁹⁰ Pynchon, *V*, p. 324.

lose their way', a kind of super-*Arabian Nights*.⁹¹ This is comparable to the search for the 'ultimate text' seen throughout Pynchon's fiction. The danger of such a search, for Pynchon, is in the mistaken assumption that we may have found it:

We assumed – natürlich! – that this holy Text had to be the Rocket [...] our Torah. What else? Its symmetries, its latencies, the cuteness of it enchanted and seduced us while the real Text persisted, somewhere else, in its darkness, our darkness...even this far from Südwest, we are not spared the ancient tragedy of lost messages, a curse that will never leave us.⁹²

While Borges' 'symmetries' and 'latencies' may enchant and seduce, they are not the 'real Text', which 'persisted, somewhere else, in its darkness, in our darkness'. Borges' stories frequently feature an association between textuality and infinity, and Pynchon derides this idea in favour of a more 'human' approach to understanding the world. In fact, by the time Pynchon wrote *Vineland* (1990), Borges is a parrot called Luis, who, whilst he 'could tell full-length stories', 'can never get much closer than the edge of the jungle', the 'jungle' symbolising here the complexity of human existence.⁹³

Whilst this observation is true of most of Borges' stories, Pynchon perhaps neglects 'The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths' (1949). The story concerns two kings who place each other in a labyrinth within their kingdom. The first king constructs a labyrinth of brass from which the second king escapes. However, when the first king arrives to meet the challenge, the second king says:

⁹¹ Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Garden of Forking Paths', in *Collected Fictions*, trans. by Andrew Hurley, pp. 119-28 (p. 122).

⁹² Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, p. 520.

⁹³ Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland* (London: Minerva, 1997), p. 223.

In Babylonia didst thou attempt to make me lose my way in a labyrinth of brass with many stairways, doors, and walls; now the Powerful One has seen fit to allow me to show thee mine, which has no stairways to climb, nor doors to force, nor wearying galleries to wander through, nor walls to impede thy passage.⁹⁴

The labyrinth of the second king is the desert, in which the first king dies. The idea of both desert (absence) and construction (presence) being labyrinths is the point to which Baudrillard, not Pynchon, alludes. Borges suggests a labyrinth *within* blankness, as well as *over* blankness. The desert is *both* the site of the apocalypse *and* the site of origin, as Virilio suggests:

The Hebraic tradition manifests two kinds of lack, expressed by two deserts, emerging one from the other, *heart of everything, in its heart everything*. One is named *Shemama*, despair and destruction, and the other is *Midbar*, which is a desert not of dereliction but instead a field of uncertainty and effort. The *shemama* is, rather, polarity of the City-State (City of Ur – *Uur*, light), its desert is the tragical one of laws, ideology, order, as opposed to what could have resulted from wandering.⁹⁵

Just as Borges' labyrinth suggests a dual form of presence and absence, the desert too has its pre-apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic forms. It is where meaning is destroyed and yet also where meaning originates, the end and the beginning. Jonathan Benison also notes this, although in relation to Ballard's 'The Concentration City' (1957):

J. G. Ballard is forcing the reader to take note that the choice – if choice there be – is not between the 'safety' of the current state of nihilism (the 'desert of listlessness' and 'pure indifference' which holds decisive numbers of people fascinated at present) *as opposed to* some destructive, dramatic Nihilism; no, this state, seemingly a 'paradoxical desert, without catastrophe, with nothing of the tragic or vertiginous' about it which

⁹⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths', in *Collected Fictions*, trans. by Andrew Hurley, pp. 263-64 (p. 263).

⁹⁵ Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, trans. by Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), p. 27. Virilio draws these distinctions from Shmuel Trigano, 'Midbar, Chemama', *Traverses*, 19 (1980), [n.pag].

would induce us to scratch our private ciphers in its sands, wandering their vast homogeneous expanses like nomads waiting for rain, could equally drive so split a being as the human one to acts of self-annihilation.⁹⁶

Here, the nihilism of human society – the ‘state of nihilism’ – is shifted to the blank desert of nihilism, in which we scratch our ciphers over nothingness. This is essentially an absurd world, in which language no longer functions. Thus, although the desert holds a key role in the determination of nihilism within postmodern fiction, as the desertion of meaning, it also evokes absurdity. For this reason, this thesis shall now turn to study the form of the absurd within postmodern literature.

⁹⁶ Jonathan Benison, ‘In Default of a Poet of Space: J. G. Ballard and the Current State of Nihilism’, in *Just the Other Day: Essays on the Suture of the Future*, ed. by Luk de Vos (Antwerp: EXA, 1985), pp. 405-25 (p. 420). Benison is quoting from Gilles Lipovetsky, ‘L’indifférence pure’, *Traverses*, 19 (1980), [n.pag] (p. 68).

6.

There is Nothing at which to Laugh: Nihilism and the Absurd

All's cheerless, dark, and deadly.

– William Shakespeare, *King Lear*.¹

VLADIMIR: Suppose we repented.

ESTRAGON: Repented what?

VLADIMIR: Oh...*(He reflects.)* We wouldn't have to go into the details.

ESTRAGON: Our being born?

Vladimir breaks into a hearty laugh which he immediately stifles.

– Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*.²

Both *King Lear* (1605) and *Waiting for Godot* (1956) reveal a different attitude towards nihilism separated by three hundred and fifty years. *King Lear* suggests a tragic response to nihilism, where the attitude that ‘nothing will come of nothing’ leads to Lear dividing his kingdom between two of his daughters and making it nothing, as the Fool tells Lear: ‘thou hast pared thy wit o’both sides, and left nothing i’th’middle’.³ *Waiting for Godot*, in contrast, suggests a comic response, albeit tinged by tragedy. Although nothing happens, the ‘nothing’ that happens is humorous, not tragic. These two responses differ primarily in their affective response to nothingness – one cries, the other laughs. This indicates that ‘there is nothing at which to laugh’, because in one sense ‘there is nothing at which to laugh – *and therefore we must not laugh*, whilst in another ‘there is nothing at which to laugh – *and therefore we may laugh*

¹ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. by Kenneth Muir (London: Routledge, 1994), V. 3. 289 (p. 204).

² Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), I (p. 11).

³ Shakespeare, I. 1. 89 (p. 9); I. 4. 183 (p. 43).

at nothing.⁴ *King Lear* and *Waiting for Godot* demonstrate the historical development of Western tragedy from what was originally Classically-derived dramaturgy towards the twentieth-century ‘Theatre of the Absurd’. The Theatre of the Absurd, inasmuch as it is part of the postmodern preoccupation with nihilism, therefore suggests a distinct turn away from tragedy towards farce.

The absurd, like the apocalypse, is not a solely postmodern concept. It emerges throughout late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, from the plays of Alfred Jarry and Eugène Ionesco to the prose of John Barth and Kurt Vonnegut. Absurdity itself entails two possible responses to nihilism – a comic laughter in the face of meaninglessness or a tragic cry for meaning – and this suggests that ‘the absurd’ emerges as much from classical definitions of tragedy as it does from twentieth-century preoccupations with meaninglessness. This chapter will therefore study the form that tragedy and the absurd take within the twentieth century, showing how twentieth-century literature engages with the tragic and the extent to which this connects to the postmodern absurd. Finally, it will demonstrate how the absurd is actually a form of the postmodern sublime and hence its relationship with a postmodern nihilism.

Twentieth-Century Tragedy and Existential Absurdity

As with the concept of ‘apocalypse’, the development of the absurd within the twentieth century is closely linked to the Holocaust and the Second World War. At this historical juncture, classical definitions of tragedy cease to encompass the apocalyptic capability of

⁴ This is similar to John Marmysz’s ‘laughing at nothing’, from *Laughing at Nothing: Humor as a Response to Nihilism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), and also suggests the ‘cheerful nihilism’ of Richard Hawk’s *A Cheerful Nihilism: Confidence and ‘the Absurd’ in American Humorous Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971).

humanity. To call the Holocaust ‘tragic’ lessens its importance writing a tragedy about (or indeed ‘after’) the Holocaust aestheticises the event to the extent that Adorno would probably find it ‘barbaric’.⁵ Similarly, Blanchot argues that ‘There is a limit at which the practice of art becomes an affront to affliction’.⁶ Tragedy is an unsuitable way of representing the Holocaust because it often acts to recuperate meaning in tragic events, as Terry Eagleton argues in relation to ‘descriptive’ and ‘normative’ tragedy:

There is one significant contrast between ‘descriptive’ and ‘normative’ tragedy. The former type of art tends to be sombre, gloomy, even at times nihilistic, and this, for its more normative counterpart, is exactly what tragedy cannot allow. It is a curious irony that for much traditional tragic theory, wretchedness and despondency threaten to subvert tragedy rather than enhance it. The more cheerless the drama, the less tragic its status. This is because tragedy must embody value; but it is odd, even so, that an art form which portrays human anguish and affliction should have been so often brandished as a weapon to combat a typically ‘modern’ pessimism and passivity.⁷

‘Descriptive’ tragedy cannot serve to define a ‘tragic’ writing of the Holocaust because Eagleton’s definition of ‘descriptive’ tragedy is so broad that any artwork vaguely negative can be tragic. For example, Eagleton writes ‘In this theatre of the grotesque [descriptive tragedy], action takes precedence over meaning, rather as it does when comedy tilts into farce’.⁸ Although he refers to Seneca, the implication remains that any work of art in which something bad happens may be viewed as tragic in this ‘descriptive’ sense. Where ‘descriptive’ tragedy would suit the tone of the Holocaust if it were valid, ‘normative’ tragedy would not – it seeks to reintegrate the tragic experience with some value that can be gained

⁵ Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), p. 34.

⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 83.

⁷ Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 9.

⁸ Eagleton, p. 9.

from it. This essentialises the Holocaust into a cathartic, redemptive experience that does not reflect the actuality of the event.

The main problem for tragedy in the twentieth century is meaninglessness. Although the Holocaust is an aspect of this, meaninglessness is an aspect of modernity itself. This is a Nietzschean hypothesis, arguing that twentieth-century meaninglessness is the culmination of a sense of alienation that has been developing since the Renaissance. The rise of Enlightenment modernity – what Nietzsche calls the Copernican movement of man ‘away from the centre towards X’ – indicates a shift towards abstraction.⁹ This abstracting of ‘the human’ results in the meaninglessness of the twentieth century. Such alienation (existential or otherwise) is incommensurable with the tragic, as Eagleton writes:

Tragedy needs meaning and value if only to violate them. It disrupts the symmetry of our moral universe with its excess and iniquity, but its power depends upon a faith in that even-handedness. Otherwise words like ‘excess’ and ‘iniquity’ would have no meaning. It makes no sense to claim that things are going badly if there is no conception of them going well. To this extent, the tragic can be a negative image of utopia: it reminds us of what we cherish in the act of seeing it destroyed.¹⁰

Although Eagleton often remains ambivalent about the ‘value’ that tragedy has, moving between seeing it as a conservative form of discourse and as ‘the limits of an existent regime of knowledge’, this problem is a serious barrier to the performance of tragedy in the twentieth century.¹¹ If tragedy needs meaning and value, then the twentieth century presents tragedy with a unique problem because that is the century in which meaning and value disappear. As the previous chapter demonstrated, the dominant feeling of the twentieth

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. by R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), §1 (p. 8).

¹⁰ Eagleton, p. 26.

¹¹ Eagleton, p. 19.

century is one of dissolution, of living *within* the apocalypse. If there is a sense of living within the apocalypse, then we already live in a ‘negative image of utopia’, and what we cherish has already been destroyed. After the atrocities perpetrated under the guise of ‘reason’ (and this is not just an Enlightenment issue), twentieth-century man can no longer possess any ‘faith in even-handedness’. Tragedy can no longer violate either meaning or value because they have both already been violated.

For these reasons, David Morgan locates ‘the Void’ at the heart of twentieth-century tragedy. He writes that ‘the tragedy of twentieth century man is that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, no power to express, together with the obligation to express’.¹² Hence, communication fails to reveal its meaning and the artwork is doomed to failure. In such cases, although ‘the obligation to express’ remains, there is no method by which to do so. This is again an aspect of Holocaust literature (the obligation to express what cannot be expressed), although Morgan finds a particular brand of nihilism within ‘modern tragedy’:

The bleak view of the holistic individual can be shown in the three factors which create the new tragedy: firstly, that nothing is; secondly, that if anything is, it cannot be known, and thirdly, if anything is and can be known, it cannot be expressed in speech or communication to others.¹³

This view epitomises an extreme metaphysical nihilism – nothing exists, if something exists it cannot be known, and even if it can be known it cannot be communicated. Morgan does not argue that ‘tragic art’ exists but that the ‘tragedy’ is life itself. The tragedy is of ‘twentieth

¹² David R. Morgan, ‘And Now the Void: Twentieth Century Man’s Place in Modern Tragedy’, *Contemporary Review*, 234 (1979), 315-20 (p. 316).

¹³ Morgan, p. 320.

century man' and is a 'new' ontological tragedy in which existence itself is tragic: tragedy is no longer art, but *how we live*.

This defines the shift between traditional forms of tragedy and the twentieth-century development of 'the absurd'. Tragedy no longer functions artistically, and so 'tragic' art reflects the tragedy of life whilst not necessarily being a 'tragedy'. Here, the absurd comes into play as 'the belief that humans exist in a purposeless chaotic universe' (*OED*). The etymology of the word indicates two useful interpretations. The first, *ab-surdus* ['from, after, since' – 'deaf, silent'], suggests that the absurd originates when the possibility of linguistic meaning is lost. The second, based upon the mathematical sense of the term (in which 'surd' indicates an irrational number), is based upon a mistranslation from the Greek *alogos* [irrational] from the Arabic *jaḍr ašamm* [deaf root]. Uniting these two meanings, the 'absurd' therefore comes from 'the silence of irrationality': when meaning is lost, tragic art mutates into absurd art. Ionesco's definition of the absurd, for example, suggests that the removal of man's historical roots causes absurdity: 'Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose...Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless'.¹⁴

This signifies a movement between crying in the face of meaninglessness – tragic art – and laughing at it – absurd art, a shift indicated by Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980). Jorge, the monk in part responsible for the crimes in the text, commits them to cover up the existence of a lost treatise by Aristotle on comedy, because 'laughter is weakness, corruption, the foolishness of our flesh'.¹⁵ In contrast to the seriousness of tragedy, whose

¹⁴ Quoted in Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Penguin, 1982), p. 23. The original source is Eugène Ionesco, 'Dans les armes de la ville', *Cahiers de la Compagnie Madeleine Renaud – Jean-Louis Barrault*, 20 (1957), [n.pag]. Esslin's translation and ellipses.

¹⁵ Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 474.

purpose is to predicate law, the laughter brought about by comedy is the apotheosis of the lack of regulation. Jorge fears this because it is heretical to his perception of Christian doctrine. Where tragedy requires value, absurdity requires its lack; where tragedy incorporates the audience into a given value system, absurdity forces the audience to laugh at such systems. Jorge's response is equivalent to the desire to retain meaning and value – the rejection of a comic absurdity.

Absurd art is not purely a comic form, however, because there are tragic elements to absurdity. Absurdity is more accurately defined as 'nihilistic farce', proving Karl Marx's point that history appears the 'first time as tragedy, the second as farce'.¹⁶ Morgan demonstrates this when he discusses the shift between twentieth-century tragedy and what came before it:

The dramatists before our time showed the sands of time running out on such as Dr. Faustus, and Hell approaching. In the twentieth century Beckett and other contemporary writers became anti-dramatist, showing time stretching endlessly, and Godot not coming!¹⁷

Where pre-twentieth-century tragedy demonstrates a potential teleology of 'Hell approaching', 'absurd' artists such as Beckett demonstrate 'time stretching endlessly'. Although two men waiting for somebody who will never arrive is partly comic, it is also partly tragic. Simon Critchley writes that, 'Humour does not evaporate in Beckett; rather laughter is the sound of language trying to commit suicide but being unable to do so, which is what is so tragically comic'.¹⁸ The eternal waiting is, as the subtitle of *Waiting for Godot* indicates, a 'tragicomedy'. Wallace Kay argues in relation to Beckett's protagonists that

¹⁶ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. by C. P. Dutt (New York: International Publishers, 1975), p. 15.

¹⁷ Morgan, p. 316.

¹⁸ Simon Critchley, *Very Little, almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 157.

‘From outside we might wail at their absurd attempts and reflect that our own attempts at meaning might be just as absurd, but instead we laugh, we become suffused with the profound optimism which emerges from their absurd situation’.¹⁹ The decision whether to laugh or cry at absurdity is fundamentally about the position we take in response to the absurd artwork. Although we laugh at the antics of absurd characters, if we include ourselves in this ‘absurd world’, then we see the tragic elements of the absurd. Absurd art may emphasise the farcical quality of nihilism, but it is nihilism nevertheless.

Alfred Jarry is one such dramatist engaged in the production of absurd art who revels in its nihilistic traits. Although the majority of his output emerged before 1900, Jarry is influential in the development of the twentieth-century ‘Theatre of the Absurd’, comprising of artists such as Beckett, Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Harold Pinter. Best known for *King Ubu* (1896), part of the *Ubu* cycle of plays (which include *Ubu Cuckolded* (1944) and *Ubu Enchained* (1900)), Jarry’s intent was to subvert traditional systems of thought. The destruction of outdated concepts – the ‘sacred cows’ of Western society – is of fundamental importance to Jarry: ‘We won’t have destroyed a thing unless we demolish even the ruins’.²⁰ Such iconoclasm evokes the feeling of a Promethean nihilism, the form of nihilism exemplified by the Russian Nihilists:

King Ubu, then, is a stentorian call for the overthrow of accepted assumptions of man, society, and cosmos; new forces were operating which necessitated new definitions and attitudes. Jarry saw that dramatists must break the chains of the past and seek a new

¹⁹ Wallace G. Kay, ‘Blake, Baudelaire, Beckett: The Romantics of Nihilism’, *Southern Quarterly: A Journal of the Arts in the South*, 9 (1971), 253-59 (p. 258).

²⁰ Quoted in Maurice Marc LaBelle, *Alfred Jarry: Nihilism and the Theater of the Absurd* (New York: New York University Press, 1980), p. 1. The original source is Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Enchained*, trans. by Simon Watson Taylor, compiled in *The Ubu Plays*, trans. by Cyril Connolly and Simon Watson Taylor (London: Methuen, 2002), p. 90.

dramaturgy to express the transformations of man and of the forces which operate upon him.²¹

The rhetoric of ‘the transformations of man and of the forces which operate upon him’ suggests a similar rhetoric to the extreme Hegelianism of the Russian Nihilists. However, whereas the Russian Nihilists sought to impose another order on the world, Jarry was devoted to merely destroying what was already there. Maurice LaBelle, when discussing Jarry’s concept of ‘pataphysics’, observes that ‘his work is dedicated to destroying nonrealistic concepts, never to creating one’, suggesting that Jarry was indeed more nihilistic than Russian Nihilism.²² Furthermore, Jarry’s absurd nihilism results in comedy, not tragedy:

Jarry saw that the expression of the absurdity of life required new forms, and one of them was the establishment of black humor as a viable dramatic technique. Its caustic and nihilistic quality not only exposes the nature of the bourgeoisie, optimism, and Christianity, but it also shows that these concepts result in the tragedy of life, which is so grievous men can only laugh at it.²³

The fact that one of Jarry’s targets is Christianity indicates a certain amount of theological nihilism on Jarry’s part. Jarry, like Nietzsche, saw Christianity as the tragedy, to which the comic absurd – Dionysian laughter – was the solution. There is a confusion of the meaning of nihilism here, because on the one hand Christianity is equivalent to (tragic) nihilism – the ‘real’ European nihilism, as Nietzsche might say – whereas in LaBelle’s interpretation of Jarry, (comic) nihilism is the solution to Christianity. Although it is evident that Jarry is associated with nihilism (especially Russian Nihilism), it is anachronistic to argue that Jarry

²¹ LaBelle, p. 168.

²² LaBelle, pp. 136-37.

²³ LaBelle, p. 96.

was himself nihilistic, unless one is willing to argue that existentialism – or at least the early form of existentialism that Jarry demonstrates – is nihilistic.

Epitomised by the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Camus, existentialism summarised the dislocation felt by man: humanity was no longer at home in the world, or even in itself. Where Jarry's drama may be seen as an early form of existentialism, it is only with the rise of Sartre and Camus that this can truly be seen as a definite philosophical approach, with a concomitant series of artworks linked with it. Camus' *The Stranger* and Sartre's *Nausea* (1938), for example, are novelistic versions of existentialism, exploring how to live in the absurd world of the twentieth century. Likewise, the 'Theatre of the Absurd' is an extension of Jarry's theatre towards the postmodern. Although Camus and Sartre share many similarities with authors such as Beckett and Ionesco, they cannot be considered part of the 'true' Theatre of the Absurd:

They [Sartre and Camus] present their sense of irrationality of the human condition in the form of highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning, while the Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and *the inadequacy of the rational approach* by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought.²⁴ (My emphasis)

Martin Esslin argues that the primary distinguishing characteristic between existentialism and absurdity is the extent to which rationality is used. Although existential art may seem nihilistic, it is a rational performance of existential philosophy; in contrast, as Esslin later writes, 'The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced *arguing* about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely *presents* it in being'.²⁵ Absurd art is therefore more akin to early

²⁴ Esslin, p. 24.

²⁵ Esslin, p. 25.

postmodernism than it is to existentialism because it concentrates on the abandonment of rational artistic devices, despite the fact that postmodernism and existentialism share ontological doubts, configured as either an external instability (postmodernism) or an internal insecurity (existentialism).

The partial links between postmodernism and existentialism confuse the issue of nihilism to such an extent that the term 'nihilism' is a veritable minefield of associations. Existentialism is frequently perceived as nihilistic because of the 'miserable' quality of a featureless existentialist world (seen in readings such as Carr's). Thus, as English Showalter argues, Camus was regarded 'as a nihilist who believed that human life was absurd and futile'.²⁶ However, in a demonstration of the historical context of *The Stranger*, Showalter observes that '*The Stranger* had no apparent relevance to contemporary political problems, but in a broader moral sense it explored the seemingly insoluble dilemma of the individual in an absurd universe and provided an antidote to nihilism and despair'.²⁷ Eagleton observes a similar fact when he writes that 'For Albert Camus in *The Rebel*, every act of rebellion implies a tragic value, which is what distinguishes the rebel from the nihilist'.²⁸ Camus therefore indicates a point of divergence between an 'absurd' nihilism and a 'tragic' existentialism. The Theatre of the Absurd, as epitomised by writers such as Ionesco and Beckett, is quite distinct from existentialism, and much more akin to postmodern pluralism or nihilism, inasmuch as it 'expresses the absence of any generally accepted cosmic system of values'.²⁹

Like Jarry, both Ionesco and Beckett explore the 'meaninglessness' of the twentieth century, although their understanding of the absurd differs because of the fifty years that

²⁶ English Showalter, Jr, *The Stranger: Humanity and the Absurd* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1989), p. 7.

²⁷ Showalter, p. 10.

²⁸ Eagleton, p. 63.

²⁹ Esslin, p. 402.

separate them from Jarry. It is no longer about the destruction of concepts, for destruction, when they were writing in the 1950s, was just too close. Rather, their concept of absurdity indicates ambivalence within ‘the human’, as revealed in Ionesco’s discussion of the absurd:

The ‘absurd’ is a very vague notion. Maybe it’s a failure to understand something, some universal laws. It [...] is born of the conflict between me and myself, between my different wills, my contradictory impulses: I want simultaneously to live and to die, or rather I have within me a movement both towards death and towards life. Eros and thanatos, love and hatred, love and destructiveness, it’s a sufficiently violent antithesis, isn’t it, to give me a feeling of ‘absurdity’?³⁰

The absurd ‘is born of the conflict between me and myself’. Following on from Sartrean ideas of consciousness, Ionesco suggests that the absurd is found in the internal oppositions within consciousness, in the middle ground between binary oppositions. Ionesco moved away from the metaphysics espoused by Nietzsche and Jarry, in which man is pitted against the realm of ideas, towards an understanding that man himself is an unresolved contraction, an absurd animal. Where Jarry destroyed unified concepts, Ionesco realised that this was merely an indicator of another problem, not a solution: when you are living on scorched earth, it is difficult to be positive about fire. Indeed, Ionesco is not even sure what nihilism may mean. When responding to a ‘loaded’ question on the nihilistic aspect of his plays, Ionesco responded, ‘And what do you understand about nihilism? For myself, I do not know very well what that means’.³¹ This suggests a pun on Ionesco’s part – ‘nihilism means nothing to me’ – implying both that he does not understand it, but also that he understands it very well.

³⁰ Quoted in Charles Glicksberg, *The Literature of Nihilism* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1975), p. 222. The original source is Claude Bonnefoy, *Conversations with Ionesco*, trans. by Jan Dawson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 120.

³¹ Quoted in Glicksberg, p. 222. The original source is the *New York Times*, 21 March 1960, [n.pag.].

Beckett is similar to Ionesco in this respect. Adorno writes that ‘Beckett’s plays are absurd not because of the absence of meaning – then they would be irrelevant – but because they debate meaning’.³² To call Beckett nihilistic is inaccurate because, like Ionesco, Beckett is saying that a meaningless world is not a blank world, but one in which meaning is indeterminate. Kay argues:

The recognition by his characters of the lack of value may result in the frantic verbal activity of Watt, the incessant self-critical babbling of the Unnameable, the philosophical idiocy of Lucky, or the insanely rational manipulations of Molloy. All these are attempts to infuse the world with meaning, to fight against emptiness, to refuse to accept a meaningless void.³³

Whilst Kay’s descriptions of the characters are accurate, his conclusion is flawed. Beckett does not ‘refuse to accept a meaningless void’ but rather refuses to accept the void because that would in some way incorporate meaning (even the absence of meaning is a meaning). In fact, Beckett’s characters are terrified of nothingness because it is an end, as Vladimir says in *Waiting for Godot*: ‘In an instant all will vanish and we’ll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness!’.³⁴ For Ihab Hassan, Beckett’s writings therefore indicate that ‘If God is dead, then nothing is permitted, and man is superfluous. A universe drained entirely of life or consciousness, drifting ever slower into empty spaces – such may be his vision of apocalypse’.³⁵

³² Quoted in Critchley, p. 149. The original source is Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Christian Lenhardt (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 220-21.

³³ Kay, pp. 257-58.

³⁴ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, II, p. 81.

³⁵ Ihab Hassan, *The Literature of Silence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 131. Hassan repeats this first statement in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 218.

From this, it is clear that Beckett writes ‘over’ nothingness, like Molloy, Watt, and the Unnameable: his absurd language writes over the absence of the meaningful world. William Haney’s interpretation of *Waiting for Godot* as a play concerned with ‘a co-existence of opposites’ is useful here, even if it is somewhat reliant upon Godot’s name being perceived as ‘death-dog’ reversed (tod-dog).³⁶ Haney’s reading is ultimately defined by the statement, ‘As a co-existence of opposites, the sacred is immanent in pure awareness, the ground between language and thought’, although this interpretation suggests more than just ‘the sacred’.³⁷ The oppositions at work within *Waiting for Godot* (and Beckett’s works as a whole) cannot be as narrowly defined as mortality and immortality. Beckett is concerned rather with a whole host of concepts that revolve around the ‘absurd’: meaning and meaninglessness, life and death, presence and absence. Beckett is, in fact, writing about a *sublime* form of the absurd, ‘sacred’ only inasmuch as this is a postmodern spirituality.

This appears in *Molloy* (1950), where after the fading of ‘waves and particles’ (the Nietzschean abstraction already mentioned), ‘there would be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names’.³⁸ This absurd world of Beckett exists in a balance *between* oppositions such as life and death. Although Vladimir observes that ‘We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?’, it is also the case that ‘What are we doing here, *that* is the question?’.³⁹ It is no longer a question of ‘to be or not to be’, but the ‘waiting’ between the two. This is also seen where Molloy says, ‘My life, my life, now I speak of it as of something over, now as of a joke which still goes on, and it is neither, for at the

³⁶ William S. Haney, II, ‘Beckett Out of His Mind: The Theatre of the Absurd’, *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 34:2 (2001), 39-53 (p. 44). The problem with interpreting ‘Godot’ is that Godot, as concept, indicates an inability to interpret and to conceptualise: it is the end for which we are waiting, but which never arrives. Of course, this in itself is a conceptualisation of the word.

³⁷ Haney, p. 45.

³⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, collected in *Molloy/Malone Dies/The Unnameable* (London: Calder, 1994), p. 31.

³⁹ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, II, pp. 69, 80.

same time it is over and it goes on, and is there any tense for that?'.⁴⁰ Life is both 'over' and ongoing, and although people are alive, they are also dead: 'did she only die later? I mean enough to bury'.⁴¹ This superimposition of life and death within the same state – 'quantum being' – is absurd. We are not dead and we have no recourse to the absolute silence of death, but we are dying, almost dead, just not quite, not quite. We are alive and thus are not 'nothing', but rather, in Critchley's words, 'very little...almost nothing'.⁴² There is a connection here with a sense of duration, as Pozzo's description of life indicates: 'They give birth astride the grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more'.⁴³ This 'light' of life – perhaps the 'absurd lights' of *Malone Dies* (1951) – situates life within the duration of a day.⁴⁴ Life is trapped in a zone between morning and night, locked in an absurd world, as Beckett writes in 'The Expelled' (1955): 'I whose soul writhed from morning to night, in the mere quest of itself'.⁴⁵ The image of life-in-a-day suggests that there is no escape from the absurdity because it indicates a cycle of repetition, an almost Nietzschean 'eternal recurrence'. Just as *Waiting for Godot* reprises the first act in the second, and *Endgame* (1958) repeats Hamm's story endlessly, the days turn but nothing ever changes.

Postmodern Absurdity

The postmodern absurd shares many of the same characteristics as the Theatre of the Absurd although, with certain notable exceptions, it is predominantly more cheerful.

⁴⁰ Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 36.

⁴¹ Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 7.

⁴² Critchley, p. 175.

⁴³ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, II, p. 89.

⁴⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*, collected in collected in *Molloy/Malone Dies/The Unnameable*, p. 289.

⁴⁵ Samuel Beckett, 'The Expelled', trans. by Richard Seaver and Samuel Beckett, in *The Complete Short Prose*, ed. by S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1995), pp. 46-60 (p. 48). Translations are Beckett's own unless otherwise noted.

Eagleton notes in relation to postmodernism and tragedy that ‘There is an ontological depth and high seriousness about the genre [tragedy] which grates on the postmodern sensibility, with its unbearable lightness of being’.⁴⁶ Although Eagleton criticises the fact that postmodernism does not deal with tragedy, ultimately, it seems, because postmodernism contains no ‘ontological depth’, tragedy does indeed grate on the postmodern sensibility. Postmodernism does not ‘do’ tragedy; it is for the most part a celebration of the absurd world:

Postmodern man has stopped waiting for Godot. The absurd is not met with despair; rather it is a living with what is, a making of the best of it, a relief from the burden of finding yourself as the goal of life; what remains may be a happy nihilism.⁴⁷

This ‘happy nihilism’ is seen in Eagleton’s reference to ‘unbearable lightness of being’ – Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984). This text opens with a discussion of Nietzsche’s theory of eternal recurrence, a meditation of being ‘within’ history. It proposes that being is ‘heavy’ if eternal return exists and that humanity is weighed down by the burden of the past. In contrast, being is ‘light’ if eternal return does not exist, again indicating the shift from tragedy to farce. Kundera writes, however, that lightness is not farcical but a symptom of ‘profound moral perversity’: ‘in this world everything is pardoned in advance and therefore everything cynically permitted’.⁴⁸ Rather than proposing that being is ‘light’ (as Eagleton suggests), Kundera remains non-partisan, asking ‘which one is positive, weight or

⁴⁶ Eagleton, p. ix.

⁴⁷ Steinar Kvale, ‘Postmodern Psychology: A Contradiction in Terms?’, in *Psychology and Postmodernism*, ed. by Steinar Kvale (London: SAGE, 1992), pp. 31-57 (p. 38).

⁴⁸ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. by Michael Henry Helm (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 4.

lightness?'.⁴⁹ The 'unbearable lightness of being' therefore indicates not only that being in the postmodern world might be 'unbearably light' but also that such lightness is 'unbearable' because everything is 'cynically permitted'. Eagleton's interpretation of the postmodern is overly simplistic because postmodernism, although it may seem dismissive of trauma, is actually the result of trauma. The postmodern absurd is therefore 'positive' absurdity that is a result of 'negative' tragedy, although to say that postmodernism is 'light' as a result is only part of the explanation.

Absurd situations are common in postmodern fiction, although they can be separated into two distinct forms. The first is the absurd perspective; the second is the absurd situation. The 'absurd perspective' is seen when the reader is presented with a way of seeing the world that they will (probably) have never considered. Texts such as Julian Barnes' *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989) and Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) epitomise this aspect of absurdity. *A History of the World* has a chapter about a stowaway on the ark, the stowaway revealed at the end to be a woodworm. Likewise, Barth's 'Night-Sea Journey' is a contemplation of a spermatozoa's journey during sex. Such perspectives force the reader to re-examine their own previous perceptions. The 'absurd situation' novel, in contrast, places the reader in a world that mirrors their own, but in a funhouse of mirrors, twisting and distorting the image (and thus Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* operates in both ways). In such novels, narrative action revolves around an irrational series of events. Rather than forcing a different *local* perception on the reader (as an 'absurd perspective' would do), this form of absurd novel forces them to reappraise their *global* perception of events. Thus, the absurd demonstrated by Carter, Pynchon, and Vonnegut, for example, are examples of placing the reader in absurd situations. This is seen also in Todd Wiggins' *Zeitgeist* (1996), where, as a

⁴⁹ Kundera, p. 5.

zeitgeist [spirit of an age], the absurd characters (including a black cyberpunk terrorist, a lesbian martial artist, and an over-sexed Jewish priest) are placed in the absurd situation of everyone in America being ‘out to get them’, from neo-Nazis to journalists, all the while discussing the relative merits of pornography, logical positivism, and the fate of the American novel.

It is clear that the postmodern absurd functions in order to force readers to question their own awareness, to question the world in which they live. As Marat says in Peter Weiss’ *Marat/Sade* (1964):

The important thing
is to pull yourself up by your own hair
to turn yourself inside out
and to see the whole world with fresh eyes.⁵⁰

This is an extension of the Theatre of the Absurd inasmuch as *Marat/Sade* epitomises, for Esslin, ‘a debate between the Brechtian and Absurdist world view’, between a violent social revolution through terror (a social approach to humanity) and an introspective exploration of man’s base desires (an individual approach to humanity).⁵¹ Postmodern absurdity, as the result of this debate, seems to come down on the introspective by destabilising the reader’s ontological position: the ‘important thing’ is to ‘turn yourself inside out’, that is, to examine your own preconceptions, until you can ‘see the whole world with fresh eyes’. Unlike Jarry’s formulation of the absurd, the postmodern absurd forces us to be ‘incredulous’ towards, rather than destroy, metanarratives, including those that we propagate ourselves.

⁵⁰ Peter Weiss, *The Persecution and Assassination of Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*, trans. by Geoffrey Skelton (London: Marion Boyars, 1999), I. 12 (p. 35).

⁵¹ Esslin, p. 433.

In relation to nihilism, one of the clearest ‘absurd’ explorations of the philosophy is Barth’s ‘opposite-twin novels’, *The Floating Opera* (1956) and *The End of the Road* (1958). Barth called these ‘opposite-twin novels’ because they study different kinds of nihilistic impulse: ‘The *Opera* I regarded as a nihilist comedy, *Road* as a nihilist catastrophe: the same melody reorchestrated in a grimmer key and sung by a leaner voice’.⁵² Barth therefore represents two varieties of nihilism – comedy and tragedy – although the texts do not offer different *representations* of nihilism but rather different *responses* to nihilism, and it is Barth’s treatment of nihilism that differs within the novels, not ‘nihilism’ itself:

Andrews and Horner are not only paralyzed by a complete and oddly cold sense of the futility of all human effort, but they carry this cosmic weariness into an absurd concatenation of relationships, infecting those around them not only with their sense of futility, but with their own tendency to verbalize that futility in a joking, allusive, self-critical patois of nihilism.⁵³

The very ability of critics to observe similar attributes for both major protagonists in these texts suggests that the ‘joking’ of Todd Andrews (in *The Floating Opera*) and the ‘futility’ of Jacob Horner (in *The End of the Road*) are actually adumbrated within one discourse of nihilism – a ‘tendency to verbalize that futility in a joking, self-critical patois’. Although each protagonist responds differently to the problem of meaninglessness, they share a certain attitude and it is that attitude which is nihilistic.

The Floating Opera is ostensibly a novel about comic nihilism, although ‘comic’ does not mean humorous, but a cavalier approach to life. *The Floating Opera* explores the psychopathology of Andrews’ turn towards nihilism, seen in a series of ‘logical’ progressions

⁵² John Barth, *The Floating Opera and The End of the Road* (New York: Anchor Press, 1988), pp. vii-viii.

⁵³ Frank D. McConnell, *Four Postwar American Novelists: Bellow, Mailer, Barth and Pynchon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 117.

made by Andrews throughout the text. These are continually being revised and updated as he comes closer to an understanding of what nihilism is:

I. Nothing has intrinsic value.

II. The reasons for which people attribute value to things are always ultimately irrational.

III. There is, therefore, no ultimate 'reason' for valuing anything.⁵⁴

Later in the text, this is modified:

III. There is, therefore, no ultimate 'reason' for valuing anything.

Now I added *including life*, and at once the next proposition was clear:

IV. Living is action. There's no final reason for action.

V. There's no final reason for living.⁵⁵

Finally, after the 'anticlimactic climax' of the novel, this fifth tenet is itself modified, as 'The Floating Opera' (the ship *and* the text) is not destroyed:

V. There's no final reason for living (or for suicide).⁵⁶

These definitions show a chain of reasoning from the initial proposition 'Nothing has intrinsic value' to 'There's no final reason for living (or for suicide)'. Andrews wants to prove that nothing is intrinsically valuable, and uses logic to justify his actions, although he fails to take into account that if 'Nothing has intrinsic value', then neither does his initial

⁵⁴ Barth, *The Floating Opera*, collected in *The Floating Opera and The End of the Road*, p. 223.

⁵⁵ Barth, *The Floating Opera*, p. 228.

⁵⁶ Barth, *The Floating Opera*, p. 250.

proposition, or the logic with which he reaches his conclusions. Logic becomes sophistry, words semantics – he is merely justifying himself to himself. Andrews reaches a partial awareness of this when he says that ‘*Nothing is valuable in itself*. Not even truth; not even this truth’.⁵⁷ If not even this truth is valuable, then there is nothing to do or say – in which case the reader is forced to question why Andrews then proceeds in the way he does in the novel. In fact, Andrews’ awareness of the inherent meaninglessness of existence forces him to fall back upon his own desires: the realisation that there is no value to this truth precedes this use of logic to justify his actions. Andrews begins the text as a nihilist, but from that point on begins to construct the world as he sees fit. He does not question his own assumptions, and thus, whilst he thinks he is a comic nihilist, an absurd anti-hero, he is in reality just another aimless anarchist in an absurd world.

This also occurs in the second novel, *End of the Road*, when the character of Jake – Jacob Horner – frequently has mild fugues, in which Jake seems to absent himself from Jake, merely leaving an automata in his place:

My mind was empty. All the way to the restaurant, all through the meal, all the way home, it was as though there was no Jacob Horner today. After I’d eaten I returned to my room, sat in my rocker, and rocked, barely sentient, for a long time, thinking of nothing.⁵⁸

Jake is ‘empty’, with mental processes that are ‘barely sentient’. He does not, however, state that he does not exist in any empirical sense, only that he becomes a biological construct, unaware of being Jake:

⁵⁷ Barth, *The Floating Opera*, p. 171.

⁵⁸ Barth, *The End of the Road*, collected in *The Floating Opera and The End of the Road*, p. 286.

A day without *weather* is unthinkable, but for me at least there were frequently days without any mood at all. On these days, Jacob Horner, except in a meaningless metabolic sense, ceased to exist, for I was without a personality. Like those microscopic specimens that biologists must dye in order to make them visible at all, I had to be coloured with some mood or other if there was to be a recognisable self to me. The fact that my successive and discontinuous selves were linked to one another by the two unstable threads of body and memory; the fact that in the nature of Western languages the word *change* presupposes something upon which the changes operate; the fact that although the specimen is invisible without the dye, the dye is not the specimen – these are considerations of which I was aware, but in which I had no interest.⁵⁹

According to Jake, Jacob Horner ceases to be Jacob Horner during these times, although the comparison to the weather is telling, as this reveals that there *is* a Jacob Horner. Jake says that ‘A day without weather is unthinkable, but for me at least there were frequently days without any mood at all’. There are days when there seems to be no weather, although this is not the case – it is merely that there is no *defined* or *signified* weather. It has not gone away, it is just quiescent for a time. In relation to Jake’s persona, the fact that his mood is blank defines his mood; this is not the ‘absence of mood’, but the ‘mood of absence’. The specimen may be invisible but it still exists and the absence of a dye does not indicate the absence of a specimen. Seeing Jake as an exemplar of nihilism indicates that nihilism is not the absence of belief (atheism), but the belief of absence (theological nihilism). Jake can still be considered a nihilist, but only within narrowly defined parameters.

Jake does not consider that perhaps there may only two identifying features of identity – body and memory – and that it is only his *persona* that seems to disappear. This recreates the problem faced by Jake as plurality, not absence, of the self. As Rennie, Jake’s lover, observes of Jake:

⁵⁹ Barth, *The End of the Road*, p. 287.

Whenever his arguments were ready to catch you, you weren't there anymore, and worse than that, even when he destroyed a position of yours it seemed to me that he hadn't really touched *you* – there wasn't much of you in any of your positions [...] I think you don't exist at all. There's too many of you. It's more than just masks that you put on and take off – we all have masks. But you're different all the way through, every time. You cancel yourself out. You're more like somebody in a dream. You're not strong and you're not weak. You're nothing.⁶⁰

The fact that Rennie says, 'I think you don't exist at all. There's too many of you' is telling, as it suggests that Jake's 'absence' may be the product of pluralism. Barth presents a character that is confronted with the possibility of too many choices. This is closely allied to the debates that surround the relationship between postmodernism and relativism/pluralism, taking the form of Goudsblom's 'nihilist problematic'. As we have seen, this states that nihilism occurs because of the legitimacy of any number of mutually exclusive judgements. Thus, if pluralism allows everything to be equally valid, the nihilist begins to suspect that if all are equally valid, then all must be equally invalid as they begin to cancel each other out. Jake is an example of this because, as he states, 'I honestly have a number of opinions'.⁶¹ This sheer number of opinions, each valid, leads to a paralysis: because of the plurality of choices before him, Jake is sometimes unable to decide anything. Jake himself realises that this paralysis is not the absence of a decision, but a decision in itself: 'Not to choose at all is unthinkable: what I had done before was simply choose not to act, since I had been at rest when the situation arose'.⁶² Thus, although it can be declared an example of the 'nihilist problematic', the reader begins to see that this inability to act is rather the refusal to act.

⁶⁰ Barth, *The End of the Road*, pp. 316-17.

⁶¹ Barth, *The End of the Road*, p. 370.

⁶² Barth, *The End of the Road*, p. 324.

Rather than nihilism, Jake actually portrays Sartrean existentialism, as Thomas Schaub observes: ‘Horner enacts, to the farcical extreme, the dialectical contradictions of Sartre’s thought’.⁶³ Although nihilism is present in Jake, in the ‘nothingness’ that ‘lies coiled in the heart of being’, this is merely part of the ‘sheer performance’ of the self, rather than any nihilistic attribute that may be appended to Jake’s character in itself: like Cage’s *4’33”*, Jake’s persona depends upon the environment in which it is performed.⁶⁴ For Schaub, Jake’s absurdity originates in Barth’s desire to ‘show the unworkability of a value system based upon arbitrary acts of reason’.⁶⁵ Although Schaub argues that ‘Sartre’s rationalism undoes itself in the struggle between Jake [the ‘nihilist’] and Joe [the ‘rationalist’]’, *The End of the Road* seems rather to allude to Sartrean consciousness itself.⁶⁶ Schaub ignores the importance of his own argument when he concludes the previous statement with ‘and the body of the text, Rennie, is the morbid result’. In such a reading, the very conflict between Jake and Joe seems to indicate the ‘I’ and the watching ‘I’, whereas Rennie – the dead body – is the absented nothingness that causes these two poles to continue circling indefinitely. Thus, rather than disproving Sartrean consciousness, Barth’s novel actually validates it as ‘the way the world works’, or at least, ‘the way the absurd world works’.

Where Barth presents an absurd world in his early fiction, it is concerned with philosophy, rather than politics. Thus, *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road* function as narrative expositions on nihilism, but say little about the historical context that gave rise to the absurd world. The novels of Kurt Vonnegut, however, explore the fact that the absurdity

⁶³ Thomas Hill Schaub, *American Fiction in the Cold War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 170.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Schaub, pp. 170-71. The original sources are Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 21 and Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existential Theory of Consciousness*, trans. by Forest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Farrar, 1957), p. 94, respectively.

⁶⁵ Schaub, p. 173.

⁶⁶ Schaub, p. 173.

of postmodern life is rooted in the trauma of the twentieth century. *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969), Vonnegut's most famous novel, is based upon the infamous Allied bombing of Dresden. Not only does Vonnegut deal with trauma (disputing Eagleton's perception of the postmodern), but he deals with it in such a way as to indicate that the Second World War was an absurd conflict between competing ideologies, not a conflict of good *versus* evil at all.

Vonnegut's novels are absurd amalgamations of everyday life and present a childlike simplicity that counteracts the hypocrisy of civilised society – what might be termed, in Vonnegut's world, an 'alien's-eye view' of humanity. In *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), Dwayne Hoover, because of some 'bad chemicals' in his head, goes mad and starts assaulting people. These 'bad chemicals' – or faulty wiring – are found the world over. Vonnegut suggests, for instance, that the Second World War is the result of 'bad chemicals': 'The people in a country called Germany were so full of bad chemicals for a while that they actually built factories whose only purpose was to kill people by the millions'.⁶⁷ Such 'bad chemicals' are an example of Kundera's 'light' postmodern world in which 'everything is pardoned in advance and therefore everything cynically permitted'.⁶⁸ It removes the blame from perpetrators of atrocities because it is not their fault, but the fault of 'bad chemicals'. Vonnegut reveals such objective fatalism (as opposed to subjective responsibility) when, in response to such events, he tends towards the blankness of either 'etc.' or, in *Slaughterhouse Five*, 'So it goes'.⁶⁹

This is almost a recuperation of Nietzsche's *amor fati*, where the blind acceptance of destiny disallows any perception of human action, although the irony with which Vonnegut

⁶⁷ Kurt Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 133.

⁶⁸ Kundera, p. 4.

⁶⁹ Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*, p. 228; Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five, or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* (London: Vintage, 1991). 'So it goes' is used throughout *Slaughterhouse Five* when bad things happen, although the explanation for its use is made in relation to Tralfamadorian perceptions of time (p. 20), discussed later in this chapter.

uses these suggests that ‘bad chemicals’ are merely a symptom of a larger ethical problem facing humanity. For this reason, ‘bad chemicals’ are not the only reason that bad things happen, as Vonnegut discloses when he discusses how the ‘creation’ of America is taught:

1492

The teachers told the children that this was when their continent was discovered by human beings. Actually, millions of people were already living full and imaginative lives on the continent in 1492. That was simply the year in which sea pirates began to cheat and rob and kill them.⁷⁰

Vonnegut’s fictions expose the absurd world in which we live, the ironies and inconsistencies, the lies we tell ourselves to justify our existence. Continuing the ‘lesson’ on the ‘creation’ of America, Vonnegut writes:

Here was another piece of evil nonsense which children were taught: that the sea pirates eventually created a government which became a beacon of freedom to human beings everywhere else. [...] Actually the sea pirates who had most to do with the creation of the new government owned human slaves. They used human beings for machinery, and, even after slavery was eliminated, because it was so embarrassing, they and their descendants continued to think of ordinary human beings as machines.⁷¹

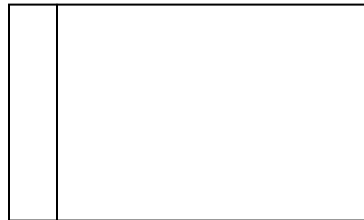
When humans are equated with machines, bad things happen. This is exactly what happens to Dwayne Hoover, who felt that ‘Everybody else was a fully automatic machine, whose

⁷⁰ Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*, p. 10.

⁷¹ Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*, pp. 10-11.

purpose was to stimulate Dwayne. Dwayne was a new type of creature being tested by the Creator of the Universe. Only Dwayne Hoover had free will'.⁷²

This is only one element of 'the human' in Vonnegut's fiction. Vonnegut writes later in *Breakfast of Champions* that 'His situation, insofar as he was a machine, was complex, tragic, and laughable. But the sacred part of him, his awareness, remained an unwavering band of light'.⁷³ Whilst the biological animal is 'complex, tragic, and laughable' – that is, absurd – there is a 'sacred part', 'an unwavering band of light' that is our consciousness. Within the novel, this is symbolised by the painting of a fictional artist, Rabo Karabekian, called *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*:



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This picture is similar to the paintings of Barnett Newman, especially *Be I* (1970). It suggests that (absurd) being exists within a monochrome field, one thin 'zip' of being existing within a darker background.⁷⁵ It also indicates Pynchon's concept of 'temporal bandwidth':

'Temporal bandwidth' is the width of your present, your now. It is the familiar ' Δt ' considered as a dependent variable. The more you dwell in the past and in the future,

⁷² Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*, pp. 14-15.

⁷³ Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*, p. 225.

⁷⁴ Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*, p. 207.

⁷⁵ As such, it can also indicate Robert Adams' perception of 'nothing', from *Nil: Episodes in the Literary Conquest of Void during the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966): '[Nothing] expresses a choked, profound hostility to the conscious mind which finds general expression in the late nineteenth century and becomes a howling chorus in the twentieth. Consciousness comes to seem a glowing band of steel' (p. 246).

the thicker your bandwidth, the more solid your persona. But the narrower your sense of Now, the more tenuous you are.⁷⁶

Vonnegut seems to agree with this, as seen in the postmodern concept of Tralfamadorian time from *Slaughterhouse Five*. In *Slaughterhouse Five*, Billy Pilgrim is abducted by aliens and the first question he asks is ‘why me?’. Their response to this ‘very *Earthling* question’ is ‘here we are, Mr. Pilgrim, trapped in the amber of the moment. There is no *why*’.⁷⁷ Tralfamadorian time is therefore a perception of temporality in which every moment is *now*, an eternal present (and thus why when people die, a Tralfamadorian says, ‘So it goes’ – they are still alive at some point in the eternal present). This itself suggests Newman’s statement that ‘The Sublime is Now’.⁷⁸ There is no ‘why’ anymore, only our awareness of identity in the Now – the world is absurd and time is meaningless. This feeling is an absurd form of sublimity.

The Quotidian and the Quixotic: Writing Postmodern Fictions

The absurd sublime is important to postmodern fiction because it is where the sublime ‘postmodern’ originates. The postmodern world is a conflict between the *quotidian* – what is generally termed ‘everyday life’, but which can also mean life that is measured and controlled – and the *quixotic* – life without rules.⁷⁹ Although postmodern fiction shows that life is absurd, there is still a political motive behind this strategy. Lyotard’s proposition of ‘sublime’ postmodernism is to escape the strictures of metanarratives, a quixotic gesture. Baudrillard’s sublime, however, is a world in which quixoticism has died, to be replaced with a purely

⁷⁶ Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 509.

⁷⁷ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, p. 55.

⁷⁸ See Barnett Newman, ‘The Sublime is Now’, in *Art in Theory: 1900-1990*, ed. by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 572-74. This is reprinted from *Tiger’s Eye*, 1:6 (1948), 51-53.

⁷⁹ Esslin also notes the ‘quixotic’ in relation to the Theatre of the Absurd, supporting the argument that postmodernism is an extension of the Theatre of the Absurd. See Esslin, p. 429.

quotidian world, a world in which oppositions are resolved in a synthetic hyperreal. This explains numerous aspects of postmodern fiction and theory. It explains why the postmodern is simultaneously seen in the heterogeneous fragmentation of structures and the homogenisation of a global marketplace, as well as why postmodern fiction is a genre of literature concerned with both liberation and paranoia. These are terms in the creation of a ‘postmodern nihilism’ – the distinction between a modernist ‘totalitarian’ nihilism, and a postmodern ‘anti-totalitarian’ nihilism.

The ‘quixotic’ impulse can be characterised, in postmodern literature, by the period of ‘substantial experimentation’ within twentieth-century literature.⁸⁰ This period encompasses authors such as Borges, Pynchon, Carter, Barth, as well as those involved in the *OuLiPo*, such as Italo Calvino, Alain Robbé-Grillet, and Georges Perec.⁸¹ The quixotic impulse reflects the rise of postmodernism within literature when traditional narrative structure was abandoned in favour of new forms and genres. The heterogeneous utopia created by this characterises an opposition between the quixotic and the quotidian in that period. Where early postmodern literature was characterised by genres such as magic realism and absurdity, other forms of literature were remaining within strictly defined parameters. New Journalism and testimonial literature, epitomised by works such as Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1965), John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* (1946), and Primo Levi’s *If This is a Man* (originally published in 1947, although its reception was so poor that it was withdrawn and republished in 1958), were produced under the realist desire for factuality.⁸² This often ironic desire for ‘truth’ in fiction, or for the complete lack of fiction, is a result of the requirement ‘not to hide reality behind verbal fences’ when representing traumatic events – as we have seen, art ‘after

⁸⁰ Nicholas Zurbrugg, *The Parameters of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 163.

⁸¹ The *OuLiPo* will be discussed in the final chapter of this thesis.

⁸² See Ian Thomson, *Primo Levi* (London: Hutchinson, 2002), pp. 252, 274-75. Again, this suggests the idea of perhaps being ‘too close’ to the trauma to fully incorporate it into consciousness.

Auschwitz' was deemed to be 'barbaric'.⁸³ Magic realism – adding a touch of 'magic' to realism – was intended to be an antidote to the drab and dangerous 'quotidian' world that such genres epitomised.

'Quixotic' postmodernism was still ethical towards traumas, although in a very different way to that which testimonial literatures proposed; it sought to undo the quotidian impulse that caused them. If totalitarianism, that which gave rise to the Holocaust, was a result of defining reality, then the promulgation of new realities – the postmodern extension of Jarry's 'pataphysics' – was a way in which ontological totalitarianism could be avoided. In contrast, postmodern authors may say, as Beckett does, that 'I have always spoken, no doubt always shall, of things that never existed'.⁸⁴ When Vonnegut describes 'old-fashioned storytellers', for example, he observes that they 'make people believe that life has leading characters, minor characters, significant details, insignificant details, that it had lessons to be learned, tests to be passed, and a beginning, a middle, and an end'.⁸⁵ Postmodernism rebelled against the modernist perception of the world that, whilst somewhat fragmented, was still overtly concerned with the proposition of 'good' art and 'bad' art. Modernism was a quotidian problem to which a quixotic postmodernism was the solution. Postmodern literature hence reflects Vonnegut's description of Tralfamadorian literature: 'There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all in one time'.⁸⁶ This

⁸³ Edith Rechter Levy, 'Admitting Reality: The Need for Accuracy in the Portrayal of the Holocaust in Literature and the Arts', *Western Virginia Philological Papers*, 44 (1999), 92-97 (p. 97).

⁸⁴ Samuel Beckett, 'First Love', in *The Complete Short Prose*, pp. 25-45 (p. 35). This is why Ihab Hassan's conception of postmodern 'pataphysics' is used in contrast to a modernist 'romanticism', and shows how Jarry's concept was altered to adhere to a postmodern framework. See Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987), pp. 84-96; and *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, p. 51.

⁸⁵ Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*, p. 209.

⁸⁶ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, p. 64.

counteracts the fact that so many characters are often ‘the listless playthings of enormous forces’.⁸⁷

This is clearly seen Angela Carter’s *Heroes and Villains* (1969) and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972), which both explore the ways in which reality is controlled. *Heroes and Villains* presents a conflict between the Barbarians and the Professors. Where the Barbarians wear ‘furs and brilliant rags’, with ‘flesh of many colours and great manes of hair’, the Soldiers (those who defend the Professors) wear ‘uniforms of black leather and plastic helmets’.⁸⁸ There is an implicit indication here of quixotic *versus* quotidian reality, where the multi-coloured, multi-textured clothes of the barbarians are opposed to the drab, almost SS or Gestapo-like uniforms of the Soldiers. These city-dwelling Professors – who call themselves *homo faber* [‘skilful man or ‘artisan’] – are contrasted to those called *homo praedatrix* [plundering man] and *homo silvestris* [pastoral man].⁸⁹ This indicates an almost Heideggerian *techné* at the heart of the city, where knowledge and technology are united in a codification of reality, as opposed to the ‘being-natural’ of the Barbarians. Similarly, in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, the conflict is between Doctor Hoffman and the Minister of Determination. The Minister is ‘the most rational man in the world’ whilst Doctor Hoffman is concerned with ‘the liberation of the unconscious’.⁹⁰ There is a psychological allegory here, where the quotidian Super-Ego and the quixotic Id clash. However, in another gesture towards the Second World War, the Minister’s Determination Police, like the Soldiers of *Heroes and Villains*, look ‘as if they had been recruited wholesale from a Jewish nightmare’.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, p. 119.

⁸⁸ Angela Carter, *Heroes and Villains* (London: Penguin, 1981), pp. 4-5.

⁸⁹ Carter, *Heroes and Villains*, p. 9.

⁹⁰ Angela Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (London: Penguin, 1982), pp. 22, 208.

⁹¹ Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, p. 22.

These readings simplify the complex discussions revolving around the opposition between quixotic and quotidian perceptions of reality in these texts. *Heroes and Villains* reveals a fundamental ambivalence about which is the positive term in the oppositional hierarchy because whilst the civilised Professors are staid and controlling, the Barbarians are excessively savage within their own hierarchy. In *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, although the Minister is a dictator who ‘ruled the city single-handed’, Hoffman himself ‘wanted to establish a dictatorship of desire’.⁹² Whilst the Minister is described as ‘a theorem, clear, hard, unified and harmonious’, Hoffman himself is ‘cold, grey, still and fathomless’.⁹³ There is little difference between the two. Although the Doctor wishes to liberate the unconscious, he is intent upon *forcing* such freedom, just as the Minister is intent upon *forcing* its repression. In this respect, both the Barbarians and the Doctor are also ‘quotidian’.

The relationship with nihilism in these texts becomes clear when considering the concept of ‘order’. Although the Barbarians differ from the Professors, there is still a fundamental order at work within their society, even if it as brutal as ‘Might makes right’. They have not abandoned order but accepted a different one; it may be a counter-ideology to that of the Professors, but it is an ideology nevertheless. Likewise, the distinction between the Doctor and the Minister can be placed in terms of the Cartesian *cogito*: the Minister’s is ‘I am in pain, therefore I exist’, whereas the Doctor’s is ‘I DESIRE THEREFORE I EXIST’.⁹⁴ Both are fundamentally predicated upon ‘*ergo sum*’ – ‘therefore I am’ and both must use a verb to define themselves, an action to determine ‘how’ they exist. This is a self-justification of being, enforcing the rule of presence over absence. Rather than allow ‘a pure, undiluted essence of being’, the Doctor seeks to channel *Das Unform* – that form of non-existence

⁹² Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, pp. 17, 204.

⁹³ Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, pp. 13, 22, 204, 211.

⁹⁴ Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, pp. 22, 211.

before ‘becoming’ becomes ‘Being’ – into something else that is still within the realm of Being.⁹⁵

Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* also explores the conflict between quotidian and quixotic conflict in terms of order, although a more correct term would be ‘control’. *Gravity’s Rainbow* represents these two poles in the ‘quotidian’ Pointsman and the ‘quixotic’ Slothrop. Pointsman is a psychologist working at ‘St. Veronica’s Hospital of the True Image for Colonic and Respiratory Diseases’ (the name itself indicates ‘true image’ – *vera ikon*) studying Pavlovian-conditioned responses, and is the part-time owner of ‘The Book’ (of Pavlov’s ‘first Forty-one Lectures’).⁹⁶ Slothrop, in comparison, is a test-subject, formerly under the control of Laszlo Jamf (another Pavlovian), and now Pointsman. Slothrop is tied to the V-2 rocket project because whenever he has sex, it is only a few days until a bomb drops in that location. Slothrop’s precognitive ability to foretell a rocket’s landing site is determined as ‘*a silent extinction beyond the zero*’, where the conditioned reflex – ‘have an erection when a bomb is dropped’ has been reduced past the zero mark until he is now conditioned to have an erection *before* a bomb drops.⁹⁷ This duality of ‘control’ – both ‘test-subject’ and ‘power’ – is Pynchon’s ambivalent term for the division between quixotic and quotidian, and suggest a division between ‘postmodern nihilism’ and ‘modernist nihilism’.

Gravity’s Rainbow can in fact be read as portraying a series of competing nihilisms, an exploration of ‘the ideology of the Zero’.⁹⁸ Nora Dodson-Truck, a medium who ‘*has* turned her face, more than once, to the Outer radiance and simply seen nothing there. And so each

⁹⁵ Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, p. 209.

⁹⁶ Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (London: Vintage, 1995), pp. 46, 88. The idea of ‘The Book’ is important because it indicates the desire for the ‘true’ text that was discussed in the previous chapter. See page 195 of this thesis.

⁹⁷ Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, p. 85. As Pynchon says in the text, ‘Italics are Mr. Pointsman’s’.

⁹⁸ Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, p. 149.

time has taken a little more of the Zero inside herself' symbolises 'erotic' nihilism.⁹⁹ Roger Mexico, 'who's never quite been to hell but speaks as if he's one of the most fallen', symbolises 'cheap nihilism'.¹⁰⁰ The fundamental distinction, however, is between Slothrop and Pointsman. As Pynchon writes: 'The Eternal Centre can be seen as the Final Zero. Names and methods vary but the movement towards stillness is the same'.¹⁰¹ Pointsman epitomises the 'Final Zero', the teleological end of a nihilism bent on destruction – the 'Fascist ideal of Action, Action, Action'.¹⁰² He is part of the 'negation of the Zero', as Dwight Eddins has noted: 'They are the code of a malign inspiriting that results from the process of extinction (in this case, of negation) beyond the Zero, badges of a life-defying presence in absence that entails its own theology and religious culture'.¹⁰³ *Sloth-rop*, however, symbolises the 'Eternal Centre', the passivity that is opposed to this 'Fascist ideal'. Pynchon therefore suggests that there are two formulations of nihilism, 'Meaning things to Them it never meant to us. Never. Two orders of being, looking identical...but, but...'.¹⁰⁴ Where modernist nihilism seeks to reduce everything to nothingness, postmodern nihilism demonstrates that nothingness cannot be brought into being, or being that desires its return to nothingness.

It is clear that there is an opposition between quotidian, modernist nihilism and quixotic, postmodern nihilism. The former aspect of nihilism is implicitly part of those 'structures favoring death' epitomised by Pointsman.¹⁰⁵ These are structures that subvert the

⁹⁹ Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, pp. 149-50. Nora Dodson-Truck's nihilism is comparable to Nietzsche's statement in *Beyond Good and Evil* that 'when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you' – Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990), §146 (p. 102).

¹⁰⁰ Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, p. 57.

¹⁰¹ Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, p. 319.

¹⁰² Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, p. 266.

¹⁰³ Dwight Eddins, *The Gnostic Pynchon* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 142.

¹⁰⁴ Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, p. 202.

¹⁰⁵ Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, p. 167.

quixotic impulse, that focus upon annihilation. Slothrop ‘escapes’ from these structures by disappearing within the novel, rather than dying:

Well here he is skidded out onto the Zone like a planchette on a Ouija board, and what shows up inside the empty circle of his brain might string together into a message, might not, he’ll just have to see.¹⁰⁶

Although Slothrop ‘revisits’ occasionally, ‘Most of the others gave up long ago trying to hold him together, even as a concept’.¹⁰⁷ Slothrop’s dissolution is indicative of the nihilism that he symbolises – a dissolution of concepts rather than their destruction. Where Pointsman hunts for the zero point, Slothrop becomes the zero, dissolving his own sense of self, only to be found ‘among the Humility, among the gray and preterite souls’.¹⁰⁸

As with Carter, such oppositions demonstrate a false sense of simplicity for Pynchon because binary oppositions are the antithesis of the absurd world that these authors create. In *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), in a passage reminiscent of Beckett, Oedipa talks of ‘waiting’:

The waiting above all; if not for another set of possibilities to replace those that had conditioned the land [...], then, at least, waiting for the symmetry of choices to break down, to go skew. She had heard about excluded middles; they were bad shit, to be avoided.¹⁰⁹

‘Excluded middles’ are created by binary oppositions when the middle ground between the oppositions is excluded from thought. This is the result of Enlightenment rationality, which

¹⁰⁶ Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, p. 283.

¹⁰⁷ Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, p. 740.

¹⁰⁸ Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, p. 742.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (London: Picador, 1979), p. 125.

promotes a ‘strictly defined clinical version of Truth’.¹¹⁰ As Elaine Safer writes, ‘the reader begins to realise that this situation is a lot bigger than simply either/or’.¹¹¹ We cannot talk of *either* ‘quotidian’ *or* ‘quixotic’, *either* ‘modernist nihilism’ *or* ‘postmodern nihilism’, without excluding something between them. As with deconstructive practice, it is not enough to simply invert the hierarchy of the opposition, as Chambers argues: ‘a reversal of binary oppositions threatens to perpetuate the very oppositional structure it rejects’.¹¹² Rather, this ‘first phase’ must also be followed by a second phase that is the ‘general *displacement* of the system’.¹¹³ It is this ‘general *displacement*’ that postmodernism proposes as the sublime form, what William Gleason has called ‘both/and multiplicity’.¹¹⁴

This ‘both/and’ is complex in itself, as Pynchon indicates in *Gravity’s Rainbow*: ‘You must ask two questions. First, what is the real nature of synthesis? And then: what is the real nature of control?’.¹¹⁵ Synthesis – the Hegelian version of the ‘both/and’ in which differences are resolved – is fundamentally concerned with control. Similarly, another version of the ‘both/and’ is invalidated in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, where Doctor Hoffman says, ‘I do not acknowledge any essential difference in the phenomenological bases of the two modes of thought. All things co-exist in pairs but mine is not an either/or world’.¹¹⁶ Although Hoffman seems initially to indicate a ‘both/and’ world, the sexual energy required by the Doctor’s ‘desire machines’ indicates a ‘static journey

¹¹⁰ Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, p. 272.

¹¹¹ Elaine Safer, ‘Dreams and Nightmares: ‘High-Tech Paranoia’ and the Jamesonian Sublime - An Approach to Thomas Pynchon’s Postmodernism’, in *Traditions, Voices, and Dreams: The American Novel since the 1960s*, ed. by Melvin J. Friedman and Ben Siegel (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995), pp. 279-97 (p. 289).

¹¹² Judith Chambers, ‘Parabolas and Parables: The Radical Ethics of Pynchon’s *V.* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*’, in *Powerless Fictions: Ethics, Cultural Critique, and American Fiction in the Age of Postmodernism*, ed. by Ricardo Miguel Alfonso (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 1-23 (p. 6).

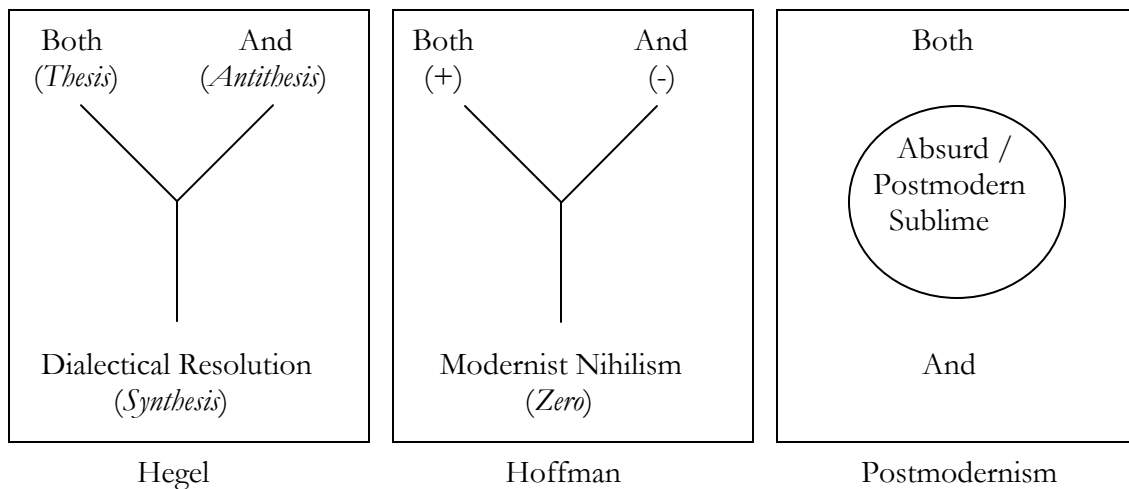
¹¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 329.

¹¹⁴ William Gleason, ‘The Postmodern Labyrinths of *Lot 49*’, *Critique*, 34:2 (1993), 83-99 (p. 93).

¹¹⁵ Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, p. 167.

¹¹⁶ Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, p. 206.

towards willed, mutual annihilation'.¹¹⁷ This 'willed, mutual annihilation' is similar to Pointsman's nihilism – it locates the resolution of the 'both/and' in the destruction of both. Postmodernism, in contrast to both of these, does not seek to resolve the differences between mutually exclusive concepts:



6.1 The 'Both/And'

Hegel resolves the differences between thesis and antithesis and Doctor Hoffman annihilates them, both leading to the eradication of the previous terms. Postmodernism, however, keeps both concepts and explores the ground between them. As Pynchon writes in *Gravity's Rainbow*: 'What happens when paranoid meets paranoid? A crossing of solipsisms. Clearly. The two patterns create a third: a moiré, a new world of flowing shadows, interferences...'.¹¹⁸ When solipsism meets solipsism 'two patterns create a third', a 'moiré'. In relation to the creation of a text, this moiré or 'patterned appearance of watered silk', is a form of quixotic postmodernism in which the pattern of the 'woven' text (from *textus*, meaning 'web' or 'fabric') is always shifting. In a similar manner to Ionesco's definition of

¹¹⁷ Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, p. 215.

¹¹⁸ Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, p. 395.

internal contradictions in humanity, Beckett's inhabitation of the zone between night and day, Barth's nihilism between comedy and tragedy, and Vonnegut's sacred 'unwavering band of light', Pynchon and Carter suggest that it is in the middle of such distinctions that the quixotic arises. In this respect, the zip of Newman's *Be I* can indicate an absurd, sublime form of being trapped between the darkness of binary oppositions. Perhaps this is also what 'postmodern' nihilism means – a form of nihilism that is 'a new world of floating shadows' *between* the modernist and postmodern conception of nihilism. Between the binary opposition of two 'present' concepts lies the 'excluded middle' of the absent. This would be a nihilism that stands outside the possibility of representation itself, absented from even the opposition between absence and presence:



Being ‘Absent-Minded’: Towards an ‘Ethical’ Nihilism

If the world is ‘postmodern’, then we should be no longer living in the modernist, quotidian world. However, as Pynchon suggests in *Vineland*, this is obviously not the case: ‘Space devoted to make-believe had, it was thought, been reclaimed by the serious activities of the World of Reality’.¹ The space devoted to quixotic enterprises has followed a more Baudrillardian path – it has been trapped in the global network of capitalism, the ‘World of Reality’. This is a shift from Lyotard’s *postmodern* to Jameson’s *postmodernity*, the ‘logic of late capitalism’.² Pynchon predicts this shift from ‘make-believe’ to ‘Reality’ in *V*, where he writes that ‘The arranging and rearranging was Decadence, but the exhaustion of all possible permutations and combinations was death’.³ This suggests that postmodern ethics – the ethics of difference and *différance*, the ‘arranging and rearranging’ of previous forms and genres – has been replaced with the ‘death’ and ‘exhaustion’ of such representational ethics – ethical nihilism.

Many have argued that ethical nihilism pervades the postmodern age, although few see nihilism as the only future possibility for human emancipation. Throughout postmodern literature, whether in the form of the desert, or in the lack of rules and regulations, absence plays a key role in the determination of a postmodern nihilism. This absence is far from being the destruction implicit in modernist nihilism, however, because postmodern nihilism, rather than suggesting destruction, indicates the need to be ethically ‘absent-minded’. This

¹ Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland* (London: Minerva, 1997), p. 192.

² Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 45.

³ Pynchon, *V* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 298.

does not mean that we must forget ethics, but that we must be ethically-minded toward absence: a shift from ‘ethical nihilism’ to an ‘ethical’ nihilism. Postmodern nihilism is, in fact, the *antidote* to a modernist, ethical nihilism.

The process by which the quixotic impulse of the postmodern was in-corporated into the larger structure of global capitalism was the rise of consumer society. This is the ‘nihilism’ of capitalism realised in Alan Sillitoe’s *Travels in Nihilon* (1971). ‘Nihilon’ is the ultimate capitalist state where everything is a commodity, including life: the highway code enforces drink-driving in order to curb the ‘excessive production’ of human life and points are rewarded for the most casualties – ‘We’ve got to keep death on the roads. It’s the only way of holding the population down’ – and geriatrics are sent to the war front because ‘They’re too busy working for Nihilon, building it up and breeding children’.⁴ Sillitoe’s allegory for the rise of capitalism in Britain (and Western society as a whole) is evident throughout the text: ‘The Land of Hopeless Gore’ rather than ‘The Land of Hope and Glory’; or the Nihilonian stationmaster saying, ‘We are all well paid, happy, prosperous, patriotic, sober, and hardworking British – I mean Nihilonian – officials’.⁵

The ‘absolute chaos meticulously organised’ of Nihilon indicates the association between postmodernity, nihilism, and capitalism that Virilio calls ‘the aesthetics of disappearance’.⁶ Technology subverted the quixotic postmodern, in the guise of television and mass media, and computers: ironically, an anti-humanist postmodern was undone by an anti-human technology. Warfare – economic and informatic – is merely the result of the technological abstraction of the human. In *Vineland*, for example, we see signs of mass media encroaching upon humanity. Set in 1984, with an obvious reference to George Orwell’s

⁴ Alan Sillitoe, *Travels in Nihilon* (London: Grafton, 1986), pp. 84, 25-26.

⁵ Sillitoe, pp. 47, 33.

⁶ Sillitoe, p. 75.

Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949), Pynchon directs the reader's attention to the 'failed' revolution of the 1960s and the measure of social control now enjoyed by the government. Pynchon locates this control in the birth of the Tube (television), which subverts the revolution and causes those involved in it to forget what they learned:

They just let us forget. Give us too much to process, fill up every minute, keep us distracted, it's what the Tube is for [...] – just another way to claim our attention, so that beautiful certainty we have starts to fade, and after a while they have us convinced all over again that we really are going to die. And they've got us again.⁷

By 'buying into' the myth of the Tube, the quixotic impulse that defined a generation is harnessed: 'Minute the Tube got hold of you folks that was it, that whole alternative America, el deado meato, just like th' Indians, sold it to your real enemies, and even in 1970s dollars – it was way too cheap...'.⁸ What now rules is the '24-frame-per-second truth' of those who wield 'Reaganomic ax blades'.⁹ The Thanatoids, who watch television all day, are the walking dead and reprise the zombies of George Romero's *Dead* series – 'What do you call a Thanatoid with 'Sir' in front of his name? Knight of the Living Dead' – and especially the consumer zombies of *Dawn of the Dead* (1978).¹⁰ 'Mass media' constructs humanity as 'mass', not as individuals, and is a media-ated form of reality: the reel, not the Real.

The second form of technological control is seen in the rise of computers. The computer defines the logic of the controlled world, a simulated world in which binary

⁷ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 314.

⁸ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 373.

⁹ Pynchon, *Vineland*, pp. 241, 90. This '24-frame-per-second truth' reprises the director Jean-Luc Godard's statement that 'Film is truth 24 times a second'. See Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, trans. by Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), p. 50.

¹⁰ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 219.

oppositions – zeroes and ones – are converted into the information-processing power that defines the World Wide ‘Web’. This is also seen in *Vineland*, where Pynchon writes:

If patterns of ones and zeros were ‘like’ human lives and deaths, if everything about an individual could be represented in a computer record by a long string of ones and zeros, then what kind of creature would be represented by a long string of lives and deaths? [...] It would take eight human lives and deaths just to form one character in this being’s name – its complete dossier might take up a considerable piece of the history of the world. We are all digits in God’s computer.¹¹

God does not define the control of human lives or deaths any longer – he is ‘dead’. The new God is the computer, which explains the paranoia that postmodern literature feels towards the binary world of computers – such paranoia is concerned with control, as we see in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1984). After the ATE (Airborne Toxic Event), to which Jack Gladney has been exposed, his data is entered into a computer: ‘It’s not just that you were out there so many seconds. It’s your whole data profile. I tapped into your history. I’m getting bracketed numbers with pulsing stars’.¹² Gladney is never told what these mean, merely reinforcing the paranoia that computers may ‘know’ more about you than you do. Furthermore, the binary logic of computers excludes the sublime form of the postmodern. As we saw in the previous chapter, the sublime originates in ‘the floating shadows’ between opposing binary concepts, and in binary logic there is no middle ground.¹³

The quixotic revolution of postmodernism was brought into the capitalist fold through technological means. The human element bowed before technology ‘as if some Cosmic Fascist had spliced in a DNA sequence requiring this form of seduction and initiation into

¹¹ Pynchon, *Vineland*, pp. 90-91.

¹² Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (London: Picador, 1986), p. 140.

¹³ Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 395.

the dark joys of social control'.¹⁴ This becomes clear in relation to 'blank fiction' where capitalism runs riot and people behave as if members of an insect hive-mind:

On the streets crowds of people were staggering this way and that, newly released from their office tombs. Grim faces, worn down like cobblestones, never to make anything of their lives. These were worker bees and drones, who had been imprisoned in American thought-patterns since birth, with no hope for escape but the weekly million-dollar lottery.¹⁵

Blank fiction, as a genre within the field of postmodern literature, is often epitomised by the realisation that there are no longer guidelines to living, that surface has taken over depth, resulting in a consumer society with no moral or ethical framework. Words such as 'morality' and 'ethics' do not appear in the vocabulary of blank fiction and thus it is the logical progression of 'ethical nihilism' in literature: their *absence* is indicative of the nature of blank fiction.

Blank Fiction: The 'Ethical Nihilism' of Postmodernity

'Blank fiction' is not a new idea, and certainly not a purely postmodern concept. The tradition of 'blank fiction' has its roots in texts such as Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) and André Gide's *The Immoralist* (1902). Nietzsche observed morality to be irrelevant when moving beyond social values: 'To recognise untruth as a condition of life: that, to be sure, means to resist customary value-sentiments in a dangerous fashion; and a philosophy

¹⁴ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 83.

¹⁵ Tama Janowitz, 'Life in the Pre-Cambrian Era', in *Slaves of New York* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), pp. 42-54 (p. 43).

which ventures to do so places itself, by that act alone, beyond good and evil'.¹⁶ This 'beyond good and evil' is a morality based in lived experience, not upon some social sense of right and wrong. Like Nietzsche, Gide also explored immorality in the context of a cultural, as opposed to transcendent, morality. However, unlike Nietzsche's 'positive' removal of social morality, Gide's protagonist, Michel, is more negative, writing at the end of the text that 'I live for next to nothing in this place'.¹⁷ Michel goes 'beyond good and evil' and finds nothing for which to live. This indicates a distinction between morality and ethics, where morality is a way of living in society, and ethics are a way of living 'in yourself'. Where Nietzsche finds an ethic in rejecting social morality, Gide shows the problems of lacking both morality and ethics. There is thus a distinction between 'immorality' and 'amorality', where the former is the rejection of a specific social compact and the latter is the rejection (or lack) of any form of morality. This realisation suggests texts such as Hubert Selby Jr's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1957), which is so relentlessly negative that is arguably one of the first texts of 'blank fiction'.¹⁸

James Annesley notes that whilst blank fiction demonstrates 'relentless emphasis on brand names, popular culture and commodities, coupled with detailed descriptions of consumerism, the reifications of violence, decadence and extreme sexuality', it also remains 'elusive'.¹⁹ Annesley prefers instead to label literature that exhibits such characteristics '*blank fictions*' because such a term articulates 'both reservations about the nature of literary categories' and 'the production of a kind of modern fiction that is flat, ambiguous and

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990), §4 (p. 36).

¹⁷ André Gide, *The Immoralist*, trans. by Dorothy Bussy (London: Penguin, 1960), p. 158.

¹⁸ Although it would be equally valid to argue that the first 'true' incarnation of blank fiction is the existential fiction of Sartre and Camus, it is important to note that the blank fiction writers are almost a 'New York School' of writing. An 'American' Selby is therefore a better indicator of the development of the genre than a 'Continental' Camus or Sartre.

¹⁹ James Annesley, *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel* (London: Pluto, 1998), p. 136.

problematically blank'.²⁰ To offer a theoretical concept that unites the entire *corpus* of blank fiction is indeed difficult, although Annesley neglects the fact that authors such as Bret Easton Ellis, Tama Janowitz, and Denis Johnson predicate their novels upon the absence of morality and ethics. Whether this is because of excessive consumption (Ellis), the fragmentation of society (Janowitz), or the inability of man to step out of the absurd condition and into some form of meaning (Johnson), each of these authors (and others, such as McInerney, Douglas Coupland, and Dennis Cooper) all tend to demonstrate what might be termed 'ethical nihilism' in its purest sense. Rather than dwell on ethical problems that can have no lasting solutions, each of these authors show that morality, for better or worse, is absent.

Blank fiction is postmodern because it demonstrates the Jamesonian conception of postmodernism as the 'cultural logic of late capitalism'. Although this argument could be applied to any artwork produced under the auspices of post-war 'late capitalism', blank fiction, like cyberpunk fiction, is inherently connected with economics. Although Marxist critics argue that all texts exhibit economic characteristics, subsumed or otherwise, blank fiction is *overtly* concerned with the value-economy of consumption, and the ways in which this absents ethics. This appears in terms of actual monetary affluence (Ellis) and poverty (Johnson), but also in the consumption of art – the buying and selling of 'culture' (Janowitz). Furthermore, whilst blank fiction is frequently deemed 'distasteful' in its concerns, it may also be perceived as exemplifying the classic Marxist diatribe of the rich abusing the poor. Blank fiction, however, is silent on this point: whether it condemns consumer society (and is therefore ironic in its glorification of violence) or revels in it (celebrating the freedom from ethical concerns) is ambiguous. In fact, this ambivalence situates blank fiction within the

²⁰ Annesley, p. 137.

discourse of both 'ethical nihilism' and 'postmodernism'. The 'silence' of blank fiction is neither complicit with capitalism nor condemning it because *it cannot judge ethical values*. It is thus nihilistic in the sense that there is no valid ethical system from which it can determine a value judgement, and postmodern because the Other (however 'distasteful') must be allowed to remain Other.

Ellis' 'blankness', for example, is concerned with the nature of consumption in contemporary America and, as such, affluence is an important factor in Ellis' fiction. In *American Psycho* (1991), the protagonist, Patrick Bateman, is a city executive whose bouts of casual violence mark him as both a psychopath and a sociopath although wealth and gender, to a certain extent, determines 'victimology'. His targets are animals, the homeless, and women – those deemed weaker both economically and physically. Indolent wealth is also a feature of Janowitz's *Slaves of New York* (1987), where she compares ancient Greece to contemporary New York:

In ancient Greece the first race of men was made of gold, and they lived like gods without labor or pain, and did not suffer from old age, but they fell asleep in death. But I'm referring now to my sister. The race of men of gold were hollow inside and easily bent and melted.²¹

Janowitz does not nostalgically summon the past to criticise the present (as Eliot's 'The Hollow Men' suggests), but argues that gold is just a surface and *always has been*: 'the race of men of gold *were* hollow inside'. There is no transference to the present tense here, as Janowitz would do were she criticising contemporary New York. There is instead a sense that the *original* 'race of men of gold' were as hollow as contemporary society and therefore

²¹ Tama Janowitz, 'Ode to Heroine of the Future', in *Slaves of New York*, pp. 245-59 (p. 245).

that all society is hollow. The connection with wealth is evident in the association between hollowness and gold, where surface value does not equate to depth.

This hollowness also translates into the language used within blank fiction novels. For example, in *American Psycho*, Ellis presents the reader with a distinct lack of emotional empathy after describing a particularly gruesome murder:

Her head sits on the kitchen table and its blood-soaked face – even with eyes scooped out and a pair of Alain Mikli sunglasses over the holes – looks like its frowning. I get very tired looking at it and though I didn't get any sleep last night and I'm utterly spent, I still have a lunch appointment at Odeon with Jem Davies and Alana Burton at one. That's very important to me and I have to debate whether I should cancel it or not.²²

A decapitated head merits as much attention as a lunch appointment, and the prose reflects this with only a blank reportage of how Bateman acts. Thus, murder and torture are dealt with in exactly the same narrative tone as a five-page discussion on the relative merits of brands of bottled water.²³ Similarly, Janowitz emphasises this blankness at the heart of death in 'Ode to Heroine of the Future', where the narrator relates the last time she saw her sister before her sister died. She meets her sister and two male friends in a bar and the sister relates a story. Afterwards, the sister goes home, takes some drugs, and falls out of her apartment window. There is no causality in the story, as it is not because of the meeting, the story, or, arguably, the drugs, that the sister dies. She just dies. After the sister's death, the reader is presented with the narrator's thoughts on the death:

²² Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (London: Picador, 1991), p. 291.

²³ Ellis, *American Psycho*, pp. 247-52.

Well, there aren't many more thoughts in my head. Only a few, like something quite defunct and forgotten in the closet: an old cheese sandwich, perhaps, or a half-empty bottle of rootbeer. Or worse still, old socks green with lichen and mold. It might have hurt me less if they hadn't published those pictures in the paper, the kind of picture that should be outlawed: my sister like a broken cup, flecked with dust and pencil shavings on the pavement.²⁴

There is no emotion in the description and although the narrator is affected by her sister's death, the prose style is not. There is a gap between the experience of the death and its representation in the story. Rather than being able to think about her sister, the narrator thinks about decaying domestic artefacts, an archaeology of urban living revealed in cheese sandwiches, half-empty (not half-full) bottles of beer, and old socks. The photograph of her sister's body, sensationally published by the paper, is also configured in these domestic terms: a body like 'a broken cup' that is covered in 'pencil shavings'.

Such 'blank' descriptions evoke the alienation felt by characters in a broken world. Johnson, in *Angels* (1977) examines the extent to which contemporary society – as a result of the 'logic of late capitalism' – is made up of broken fragments. Living in this society is akin to being homeless, because there is no sense of being at home within oneself, as Bill Houston realises:

The street out there was a mess of things – trash and rust and grease – all holding still for a minute. In his mind he was wordless, knowing what the street was and who he was, the man with the fingerprints looking out at the street, one bare foot resting on a shoe and the other flat on the chilly linoleum, a drunk and deluded man, without a chance. It was all right to be who he was, but others would probably think it was terrible. A couple of times in the past he'd reached this absolute zero of the truth, and without fear or bitterness he realized now that somewhere inside it there was a move he could make to change his life, to become another person, but he'd never be able to guess what it was.²⁵

²⁴ Janowitz, 'Ode to Heroine of the Future', p. 259.

²⁵ Denis Johnson, *Angels* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), pp. 41-42.

Although Johnson presents the potential for salvation, this potential is tragic because Bill is unable to reach it. The ‘absolute zero of truth’ is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s state of ‘beyond good and evil’, although it is presented in a far less positive light. Here, although salvation may exist (and Johnson, out of all the ‘blank fiction’ writers, is alone in this possibility for redemption), Bill has no way of knowing what it is, or what path to take to be redeemed. Instead, the future is presented in solely negative terms:

Its easy to talk about the future being so good and all, because it never comes, dear. But all you gotta do is look around you for half a minute. Nobody’s keeping it secret from us that we’re all in the same toilet. We’re in the sewer. Forecast tomorrow is more of the same.²⁶

Thus, blankness is also realised in pessimism about the future. Leonard English, the eponymous ‘hanged man’ of Johnson’s *Resuscitation of a Hanged Man* (1991), cannot quite bring himself to believe what he must in order to be redeemed:

He didn’t pray anymore for faith, because he’d found that a growing certainty of the Presence was accompanied by a terrifying absence of any sign or feeling or manifestation of it. He was afraid that what he prayed to was nothing, only this limitless absence.²⁷

English’s ‘theological nihilism’ leads to the ‘ethical nihilism’ at the heart of the text. This suggests a distinction between ethical nihilism that is the result of the ‘logic of late capitalism’ (seen in Ellis and Janowitz) and ethical nihilism that is the result of the absence of

²⁶ Johnson, *Angels*, p. 71.

²⁷ Denis Johnson, *Resuscitation of a Hanged Man* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 119.

God or transcendent meaning (seen in Johnson). Whilst all these authors demonstrate ethical nihilism, the mechanism by which it comes to be realised differs.

Responses to such nihilistic blankness also differ within blank fiction. Where Ellis' Bateman and Janowitz's narrators just accept blankness as part of everyday life, other protagonists, like Johnson's characters, search for some form of meaning. Clay, the protagonist of *Less Than Zero* (1985), says 'I realize that the money doesn't matter. That all that does is that I want to see the worst'.²⁸ Clay wants to see the worst because he is so jaded that normal experiences mean little to him, although he is still searching for feeling. As Virilio argues, economic capitalism is thereby subordinated to the feeling of continued warfare, of living within the disaster. One of the most traumatic scenes in *Less Than Zero* is the gang rape of a twelve-year-old girl. After all the drugs and snuff movies, Clay reaches the limits of his jaded morals and cannot watch, saying that 'I don't think it's right', although he still does not help the girl in any way – moral blankness means that he does not care about the girl, only that this 'experience' is not for him.²⁹ His friend, Rip, responds: 'What's right? If you want something, you have the right to take it. If you want to do something, you have the right to do it'. When Clay observes that Rip has everything, Rip disagrees: 'I don't have anything to lose'.³⁰ This attitude defines blank fiction, because however much the characters have, they never have anything to lose –they have 'nothing' with which to begin. This is a result of the ethical nihilism implicit to such fiction, even if the hedonism itself is not nihilistic. There is no escape from this, as even Patrick Bateman realises when, at the end of

²⁸ Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (London: Picador, 1986), p. 160.

²⁹ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, pp. 176.

³⁰ Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, pp. 176-77.

American Psycho, we see a door saying ‘This is not an exit’.³¹ There is no escape from here, only the eternal search for an absent meaning, the eternal waiting for Godot.

How do blank fiction characters find meaning where there is none? Most just muddle through life, going about their routines, although those that actively search for some principle for action generally use violence, and are sated by ‘negative’ experiences such as murder and torture. However, whereas Ellis portrays the predators and victimisers of the blank world, Johnson inverts the casual violence so that his characters are preyed-upon victims:

They started calling it The Rape, and it came to stand for everything: for coming together while falling apart; for loving each other and hating everybody else; for moving at a breakneck speed and getting nowhere; for freezing in the streets and melting in the rooms of love. The Rape was major and useless, like a knife stuck in the midst of things. They could hate it and arrange their picture of themselves around it.³²

When Bill visits Jamie after she is raped, they become lovers, and ‘The Rape’ becomes defined as the centre of the world. It is ‘major and useless, like a knife stuck in the midst of things’. Ironically, without the knife staunching the wound it has caused, meaning would bleed out of the world. Whatever causes emotion is necessary for a sense of meaning to be preserved, and yet the meaning found through pain is solely negative. Trauma, here, is not an indicator of absence – what might be termed the repression of a negative experience – but an indicator of presence, a badge to wear to keep blankness at bay.

In the world of blank fiction – a world that mirrors our own – the absence of rules and regulations defines the ethical nihilism pervading it. This indicates a link between nihilism

³¹ Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 399.

³² Johnson, *Angels*, p. 64.

and the sublime because ‘The retreat of rules and regulations is the cause of the feeling on the sublime’ and yet also the cause of the feeling of blankness – nihilism.³³ The blankness of the world without morals, what has come to be known as ‘ethical nihilism’, defines a sublime world. Although Lyotard would disagree with this use of his statement, blank fiction uses this absence of ethical regulation, whether resulting from the ‘the death of God’ or the distrust towards metanarratives shown by postmodernism, to indicate the moral void at the heart of late-twentieth-century Western society. This link between violence and the sublime is not completely arbitrary, however, as Barry Taylor observes when reading Thomas Harris’ *Red Dragon* (1989) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1990): ‘Lecter, then, may serve as a mythical instance of Lyotard’s sublime object, a representation of the violence of the event in which this terroristic potential is not repressed’.³⁴ This ‘terroristic potential’ emerges when postmodernism is ‘insufficiently deconstructive’ and falls into ‘a terrorism not only of consensus but of dissensus’.³⁵ In this sense, ‘blank fiction’ utilises an *incomplete* postmodernism, using the central concepts of absence and ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ to indicate blankness, without ever achieving the ‘ethical’ balance of a world accepting of difference. Hence, the ‘ethical nihilism’ of blank fiction is entwined with its postmodern nature, and suggests a fundamental link between the postmodern sublime and the absence of morals that is called ‘ethical nihilism’.

³³ Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Complexity and the Sublime’, in *Postmodernism: ICA Documents 4 & 5*, ed. by Lisa Appignanesi (London: Free Association Books, 1986), pp. 10-12 (p. 11).

³⁴ Barry Taylor, ‘The Violence of the Event: Hannibal Lecter in the Lyotardian Sublime’, in *Postmodern Surroundings*, ed. by Steven Earnshaw (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), pp. 215-30 (p. 224).

³⁵ Taylor, p. 224.

(En)Gendering Absence

The common link between violence and sex indicated in the previous section defines another step in the direction of an ‘ethical’ nihilism. Blank fiction indicates an association between sex and violence that is predicated upon masculine control of the female body. Hence, when looking at the representation of women within certain postmodern texts, we observe what Mary Allen has called ‘the necessary blankness’. She argues that ‘The most noticeable quality of women in the literature of the [nineteen-] sixties is their blankness’.³⁶ Their blankness is not an inherent quality, but one that is appended to them by men, indicating that femininity functions as a monstrous Other within certain postmodern texts: ‘Men now project a kind of horrible blankness of the age onto the image of women’.³⁷ Although Allen’s approach indicates that women are equivalent to blankness, this ‘blankness’ can be categorised as ‘absence’, meaning that certain texts demonstrate *absented femininity*. Placing this in a larger context than just American fiction of the 1960s reveals not only an ‘absented femininity’ but also a *feminised absence*. Rather than the discursive construction of femininity as absent, this inversion suggests that absence is itself feminised. Thus, two dominant modes exist in the juxtaposition of femininity and absence.

This juxtaposition of femininity and absence, whether as ‘absented femininity’ or ‘feminised absence’, is characterised in four ways throughout postmodern literature. The first is the representation of women as somehow absent within a male-dominated world, seen in the works of authors such as Carter and Barth. The second is connected with blank fiction in the sense that it locates violence and sex in a masculine discourse of power, seen in the works of authors such as Erickson. This mutates into the third formulation, in which an

³⁶ Mary Allen, *The Necessary Blankness: Women in Major American Fiction of the Sixties* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), p. 7.

³⁷ Allen, p. 7.

apocalyptic form of femininity has the potential to destroy masculinity, seen in Erickson and Carter, where absence and passivity act as a positive measure of worth, rather than the negative lack of identity. This demonstrates the extent to which absence, passivity, and silence are more ethical than their respective reversals. The fourth, concerning the postmodern appropriation of the Eurydice myth, configures femininity as a sense of absent meaning that must be discovered, and is seen in the works of authors such as Pynchon, Italo Calvino, and Kathy Acker.³⁸

Carter's *Love* (1971) is an example of the ways in which women are configured as absent within patriarchal society. The text is constructed through a triumvirate of characters: Lee, his brother Buzz, and Annabel, Lee's wife. Annabel, the only primary female character, is 'absented' from the action of the text by Lee and Buzz, who use her to determine their own relative power. Buzz has 'neither talents nor aptitudes, only a disconcertingly sharp intelligence and a merciless self-absorption'.³⁹ Lee, in contrast, seems open and friendly, although his description indicates egocentricity:

Like most people who happen to be born with a degree of physical beauty, *he had become self-conscious* very young in life and so profoundly aware of the effect his remarkable appearance on other people that, by the age, of twenty, *he gave the impression* of perfect naturalness, utter spontaneity and entire warmth of heart.⁴⁰ (My emphasis)

³⁸ There is actually a fifth formulation within postmodern fiction, although it is only partially associated with 'absented femininity'. This occurs when postmodernism attempts to recover those feminine narratives that were previously made absent, such as in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) where the absent woman of *Jane Eyre* – the madwoman in the attic – is brought into presence. Thus, the absented femininity of the earlier novel is undone and there is an aspect of the juxtaposition between absence and femininity, although it is more properly a *presenting*, rather than *absenting*, of femininity.

³⁹ Angela Carter, *Love* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 12.

⁴⁰ Carter, *Love*, p. 12.

Lee and Buzz are the egocentric poles of the text between which Annabel is pulled. Annabel, with ‘no instinct for self-preservation if she was confronted by ambiguities’, eventually commits suicide.⁴¹ Although Carter ensures that each character is given the same amount of detail, Annabel is still ‘absent’. For example, the first time Annabel and Lee have sex, Annabel dresses in Buzz’s clothes and is ‘extraordinarily erotic’ because of ‘her passivity, her silence’.⁴² She has a ring (belonging to Buzz’s father) that makes her ‘invisible’, which she wears alongside the wedding band given to her by Lee.⁴³ Other women in the text are also absent, including Lee’s numerous ‘other women’ (itself suggesting a deferral of identity and power) and his ‘insane’ mother who was taken from him when he was a child.

Like *Love*, Barth’s *The End of the Road* presents the reader with a domestic scenario in which two powerful men overshadow the female character. Despite Jake’s ‘nihilism’, Rennie is a ‘complete zero’, the true absent figure of the novel.⁴⁴ When she first met her husband, Joe, she had to completely reinvent herself: ‘I threw out every opinion I owned because I couldn’t defend them. I think I completely erased myself, [...] right down to nothing, so I could start over’.⁴⁵ She ‘peered deeply inside herself and found *nothing*’.⁴⁶ As Joe’s wife and Jake’s lover, she is ‘caught between the ideologies of Morgan [Joe] and Horner [Jake], and is crucified between those rending abstractions’.⁴⁷ Rennie’s dream of God (Joe) and the Devil (Jake), in which she is caught between them, is indicative of the theme of ‘passion’ that defines Rennie’s character.⁴⁸ She encompasses the ‘animal life’ and ‘vitality’ of the text, what

⁴¹ Carter, *Love*, p. 1.

⁴² Carter, *Love*, p. 33.

⁴³ Carter, *Love*, p. 54.

⁴⁴ John Barth, *The End of the Road*, collected in *The Floating Opera and The End of the Road* (New York: Anchor Press, 1988), p. 306.

⁴⁵ Barth, p. 311.

⁴⁶ Barth, p. 316.

⁴⁷ Frank D. McConnell, *Four Postwar American Novelists: Bellow, Mailer, Barth and Pynchon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 130.

⁴⁸ See Barth, p. 317.

Schaub has called a ‘dramatic rebuke to the inhuman theorizing of the two men who compel her to divided loyalty’.⁴⁹ The dream indicates that Rennie may be symbolic of ‘the world’ in which the conflict between meaning and meaninglessness occurs, and her will for life – her ‘passion’ – is echoed in the juxtaposition of suffering and love that is caused by Jake and Joe. Ultimately, as Frank McConnell observes, she is ‘crucified’, although the reader must be wary of ‘inhuman theorizing’ at Rennie’s expense, for in novelistic terms there is a human cost to pay. The abortion at the heart of the text, and which causes Rennie’s death, is a direct allegory for the aborted nature of life in the face of this ‘inhuman theorizing’, and to use Rennie to justify a reading is to be as complicit in her death as Jake and Joe.

Both *Love* and *The End of the Road* demonstrate the way in which women are ‘written over’ by men. This is not an innocent hermeneutic game, but one that is indelibly marked by the violence of representation. This is the second formulation of ‘absented femininity’, because it reveals the violence at the heart of such representations. Erickson’s representation of women may represent women as ‘absent’, but he analyses the masculine desire to contain this absence in terms of rape. In *Arc d’X* (1993), he describes Wade, an obsessive black police officer, looking at a white stripper called Mona:

Looking into her was like descending concentrically through a maze to a door in the center, where you expect to find a confessional and instead step onto a veldt that stretches as far as the eye can see. A hysteria of nothingness, inviting him to mount it, empty himself into it.⁵⁰

This description quite obviously describes women in terms of absence, as the masculine gaze explores a maze to find a confessional (a sexual ‘release’ from sin) but finds a ‘veldt that

⁴⁹ Thomas Hill Schaub, *American Fiction in the Cold War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 166.

⁵⁰ Steve Erickson, *Arc d’X* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 79.

stretches as far as the eye can see' – an association between the female body and the natural landscape. It also suggests, however, a 'feminine' absence with the phrase 'hysteria of nothingness'. The passage describes female genitalia and the masculine attempt to control this 'other' sexuality of passivity and absence by 'writing over' that absence. This obviously has connections with the contrast between 'maze' and 'veldt' (as two forms of labyrinth) and because of the (masculine) desire to write over this (feminine) absence, as discussed previously.⁵¹ The representation of Wade suggests control, because of both his membership of an Althusserian repressive Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and his masculinity: this union of gender and ideology is an important element of Erickson's works. Erickson argues that 'Politics is a manifestation of psychology and sexuality, rather than sexuality being a manifestation of politics', suggesting that Wade's career within an ISA is indicative of his gender's desire to control femininity.⁵²

The perception of politics as 'a manifestation of sexuality' is especially relevant in terms of the creation of America within *Arv d'X*. Erickson suggests that Thomas Jefferson only 'creates' America after the rape of one of his slaves, Sally Hemings:

It's a thing to be confronted every moment of every day by everyone who hears even its rumor: it will test most those who presume too glibly to believe in it. But I know it's a flawed thing, and I know the flaw is of me. Just as the white ink of my loins has fired the inspiration that made it, so the same ink is scrawled across the order of its extinction. The signature is my own. I've written its name. I've called it America.⁵³

⁵¹ See pages 194-96 of this thesis.

⁵² Larry McCaffery and Takayuki Tatsumi, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson', *Contemporary Literature*, 38:3 (1997), 395-421 (p. 405).

⁵³ Erickson, *Arv d'X*, p. 46.

Again, we see the union between politics and sexuality, but we also see that sex is still represented as the act of writing male doctrine on the absent female page, as America is created by ‘the white ink’ of Jefferson’s loins. This (masculine) writing over (feminine) absence is seen throughout Erickson’s novels, and it signifies the beginnings of totalitarian control by men. In *Tours of the Black Clock*, for example, Banning Jainlight, an author of pornography for Z (Hitler), believes ‘the centre of our century’ is his crotch.⁵⁴ Jainlight defines the *active* control of the Twentieth Century with what is essentially phallogocentrism, in which the male control of language defines reality.

Erickson could be accused of perpetuating this reification of masculine power throughout his literature because the bizarre, and often twisted, unions between his characters almost inevitably involve some form of control; control of the environment in which sex takes place or control during the sexual act itself, in the use of bondage. However, these portrayals are present in order to demonstrate the ways in which women may use their assumed passivity against masculine discourse. In *Tours of the Black Clock*, for instance, Dania is the centre of the text, not Banning Jainlight, because all of the male characters are in some way associated with her (whether as son, lover, father, beau, or imaginary uncle). Dania defines the *passive* hub of the Twentieth Century through her connections to all the men in the text who, although they wish to understand her (in Levinas’ sense of the word as ‘possession’), cannot begin to understand. During a dance audition, she confuses the judges because they cannot understand her:

‘But there’s no structure to her form,’ one of them said, or perhaps he said there was no form to her structure. Young [one of the other dancers] laughed, ‘She’s inventing her

⁵⁴ Steve Erickson, *Tours of the Black Clock* (London: Futura, 1990), p. 150.

own structures, can't you see?' He detested the way they supposed that the structures they didn't recognize weren't structures at all.⁵⁵

She is dancing according to her own internal structure, but because the judges do not understand this structure, they assume there is no structure; because they cannot 'understand' her, they assume that there is nothing to understand. Shortly before this passage, her dance is defined as a dance 'against history' and Dania's dance is thus politically engaged with ideas of feminine freedom from the strictures of patriarchal society: 'She danced the moments so as to own them for herself'.⁵⁶

Men frequently try to control Dania, and in some way incorporate her into the world they understand. Blaine, a detective, begins following Dania and discovers a trail of death behind her: 'The more he investigated the more he found men dying every time she danced; they had signs of being poisoned right down to the wine glasses in their hands, and that odd look poison leaves in the eyes'.⁵⁷ The question of causality comes to the fore here, however, as Dania observes when he confronts her:

'Don't you see,' she said with some exasperation, 'it could just as easily have had nothing to do with me. It could just as easily have had everything to do with you [...] You thought someone was dying every time I danced. But maybe that wasn't it at all,' she said. 'Maybe,' she said, before disappearing, 'someone was dying every time you watched me dance'.⁵⁸

This inversion reveals the extent to which the male characters in the text force their own conclusions onto her and her body: 'I got tired of being men's dreams. [...] I never meant to

⁵⁵ Erickson, *Tours of the Black Clock*, p. 201.

⁵⁶ Erickson, *Tours of the Black Clock*, p. 201.

⁵⁷ Erickson, *Tours of the Black Clock*, p. 234.

⁵⁸ Erickson, *Tours of the Black Clock*, p. 241.

be anyone's dream but my own'.⁵⁹ As Erickson himself says, 'The real point of Dania's dancing has to do with voyeurism and obsession and men transforming women into their fantasies'.⁶⁰

If Dania can free herself from masculine control and history by dancing, then the methods employed by Erickson's other female characters are more overtly threatening to masculine power, demonstrating the third formulation of 'feminised absence'. In *Amnesiascope* (1996), Jasper talks about a *ménage à trois* in which two women tie up a man:

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking it's every man's fantasy. Every man thinks it's his fantasy. But when I held his face between my thighs and put myself in his mouth to make myself come, I could tell he realized it wasn't his fantasy, it was *my* fantasy.⁶¹

Jasper's act destabilises the male possession of the female body by inverting the power structure within the sexual act. This also inverts the power struggles seen in Carter's *Love* and Barth's *The End of the Road* with two women controlling one man. The man is tied down, passive, and Jasper takes the active role – the use of the verbs 'held', 'put myself', 'make myself' each determine a sexual role that is not concerned with the man, but with her own pleasure. In doing this, Jasper inverts a masculine fantasy and transforms it into a feminine one, recreating women as the active partner in the sexual act. Jasper is a sexual predator, and this unnerves men who see her. She is 'absolutely crazy, the Abyss Walking like a Woman, madness so generic it practically had a bar code on it'.⁶² By undermining male domination,

⁵⁹ Erickson, *Tours of the Black Clock*, p. 241.

⁶⁰ McCaffery and Tatsumi, p. 417.

⁶¹ Steve Erickson, *Amnesiascope* (London: Quartet, 1996), pp. 87-88.

⁶² Erickson, *Amnesiascope*, p. 99.

she has become ‘the Abyss Walking like a Woman’ – a nihilistic destroyer of masculine control. This is, of course, what is meant by an apocalyptic feminist discourse.

The women in Erickson’s texts free themselves from masculine control, in effect, by absenting themselves from it. By embracing the absence and passivity that they have been interpreted as having, they empower themselves. Sally and Mona both invert the masculine fantasy of colonising the female body by turning a rape of them into a rape of the male: when Wade rapes Mona, she inverts this until ‘her own blackness ravished his’.⁶³ Similarly, the masculine orgasm is ‘the small deaths of those men’ because it is the point at which they lose their purported control.⁶⁴ During a mysterious encounter in the hotel room, Georgie, a neo-Nazi with a control complex, is completely disarmed during sex by the mention of the word ‘America’:

What had it meant, that at the height of his power over her and in the depths of his humiliation of her, she had said it and he’d lost everything? She’d said it like a magic word and immediately it had broken his power over her.⁶⁵

This use of the word ‘America’ is indicative of the duality that exists within Erickson’s conception of America. One aspect is concerned with control, domination, and the masculine drive to interpret and codify reality. In contrast, the second is the side of freedom, love, and the feminine ability to create something new. Thus, Erickson always presents a duality within his texts; *Rubicon Beach* (1986) presents America One and America Two, *Tours of the Black Clock* presents two different centuries, and *Amnesiacope* presents the distinction between remembering and forgetting as aspects of memory. In *Arc d’X*, Erickson writes

⁶³ Erickson, *Arc d’X*, p. 98.

⁶⁴ Erickson, *Arc d’X*, p. 98.

⁶⁵ Erickson, *Arc d’X*, p. 238.

about two different conceptions of time – ‘the gravity of authority versus the entropy of freedom’ – in which authority is configured as masculine and freedom as feminine.⁶⁶ Although Erickson reinforces the truism that femininity is passive, by associating men with ‘gravity’ and women with ‘entropy’, he makes this absence positive.

Carter also configures women in terms of entropy and absence throughout her fiction. *The Passion of New Eve* is a text primarily informed by early postmodern theory and French Feminism, and features Evelyn’s transformation into Eve. Within the text, ‘Our Lady of Dissolution’, Carter’s version of Erickson’s ‘the Abyss Walking like a Woman’, presides over a city of chaos.⁶⁷ Chaos is defined as ‘the primordial substance’ and ‘the earliest state of disorganised creation, blindly impelled towards the creation of a new order of phenomena of hidden meanings. The fructifying chaos of anteriority, the state before the beginning of the beginning’.⁶⁸ This definition is in many ways similar to the construction of nihilism presented by this thesis because it is ‘the earliest state of disorganised creation’, ‘the state before the beginning of the beginning’. Chaos, as the central theme in *The Passion of New Eve*, is that which unites nihilism and the sublime within the postmodern: it ‘embraces all opposing forms in a state of undifferentiated dissolution’ in an ‘intoxicating rhetoric’.⁶⁹ The embracing of ‘all opposing forms’ is fundamentally postmodern. However, it also suggests the sentential paradoxes upon which a postmodern nihilism is predicated. This chaos is also sublime, ‘intoxicating’ in its rhetoric. Most importantly, it is female. When Evelyn arrives at Beulah – the matriarchal city – he observes that ‘I am in Beulah, the place where contraries exist together’.⁷⁰ The ‘feminised absence’ is also found when Carter talks about the ‘mineral

⁶⁶ Erickson, *Arc d’X*, p. 216.

⁶⁷ Carter, *The Passion of New Eve* (London: Virago, 1996), p. 15.

⁶⁸ Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 14.

⁶⁹ Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 14.

⁷⁰ Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 48.

eradication of being'.⁷¹ Although it seems as if she is referring to the desert (again locating it as the site of the destruction of being), the text moves on to describe a 'monumental' broken penis, which can also suggest that the 'mineral eradication of being' actually refers to this stone structure, and not to the desert at all. This returns us to the idea of feminised chaos, where 'ordered' being is equivalent to masculine 'presence' and the eradication or dissolution of being is a feminine 'absence'.

The final representation of femininity as absence is the postmodern appropriation of the Eurydice myth. Eurydice and Orpheus, according to classical mythology, were lovers until Eurydice died. Orpheus was allowed to journey to the Underworld to get her back, but only on the condition that he did not look back at Eurydice following him. He looked back, and Eurydice was condemned to stay in the Underworld. This myth is apparently 'mistakenly deduced from the pictures which show Orpheus's welcome in Tartarus', and so only appears late in classical mythology, although this apparent lack of basis does not devalue the power that this myth exercises in the postmodern world.⁷² Hassan, for example, finds the origins of a postmodern literature in 'the dismemberment of Orpheus', indicating Orpheus' punishment for preferring young men to women (in Ovid's version of the myth), and interprets authors from Sade to Beckett through the trope of this dismemberment.⁷³ This 'dismemberment', in a certain sense, may be interpreted as Carter's 'eradication of being', indicating an apocalyptic feminism at work within postmodernism.

More generally, the postmodern search for absent meaning is configured within its fictions as variations on the Eurydice myth: Orpheus hunting for Eurydice. Pynchon's *V*, for

⁷¹ Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 47.

⁷² Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 2 vols (London: Folio Society, 1999), I, p. 115.

⁷³ See Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 5.

example, reveals that the search for ‘V’ is essentially a search for the feminine Other. ‘V’ is variously incarnated as Veronica (also the ‘true image’ of *Gravity’s Rainbow*) Manganese, Vheissu, Venus, Vera Meroving, and Victoria Wren. Although the text suggests other incarnations, the identity of ‘V’ is predominantly feminised.⁷⁴ Chambers notes this juxtaposition of femininity and absence throughout Pynchon’s fiction in relation to ‘the ancient White Goddess whose destruction symbolizes the impoverishment of language, the appropriation of mystery and paradox, and the diminishment of the Other’.⁷⁵

Calvino’s overt use of the Eurydice myth is of particular interest, because throughout his texts the female is always the absent object of male desire, as Marilyn Schneider argues: ‘Woman as hidden signifier, a symbol of desire and absence, represents the eternal potential’.⁷⁶ This idea recurs throughout Calvino’s works, from *Cosmicomics* (1965) to *If on a winter’s night a traveller* (1979). In *Cosmicomics*, for example, the stories generally feature Calvino’s protagonist, Qfwfq, being thwarted in his desire for the central female character. In ‘The Distance of the Moon’, this is due to her absence from earth, as she desires to live on the moon. In other stories, Qfwfq is separated from the desired woman by universal circumstance – in ‘All at One Point’ because of the Big Bang, in ‘Without Colours’ because of colour coming into the world, and in ‘The Form of Space’ because parallel lines never intersect.

Masculine desire for the unattainable female body is also a significant part of *If on a winter’s night a traveller*, where the search for the real ‘If on a winter’s night a traveller’ text is

⁷⁴ As a feminised ‘V’, this may suggest a ‘vaginal’ V studied by Catherine Blackledge in *The Story of V: Opening Pandora’s Box* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2003).

⁷⁵ Judith Chambers, ‘Parabolas and Parables: The Radical Ethics of Pynchon’s *V.* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*’, in *Powerless Fictions: Ethics, Cultural Critique, and American Fiction in the Age of Postmodernism*, ed. by Ricardo Miguel Alfonso (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 1-23 (p. 1).

⁷⁶ Marilyn Schneider, ‘Subject or Object? *Mr Palomar* and *Invisible Cities*’, in *Calvino Revisited*, ed. by Franco Ricci (Ottawa: Dovehouse, 1989), pp. 171-87 (p. 179).

subsumed by the desire of the *Lettore* [male reader] for the *Lettrice* [female reader] symbolic of the search for meaning in what is Other. Here, women are compared to textual meaning and sexual fulfilment (*jouissance* by a *Lettore*), and the frustration of having the ‘wrong’ reading is compared to an act of sexual union with the ‘wrong’ woman. This is seen in the micronarrative, ‘On the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon’, in which the protagonist becomes sexually involved with the mother of the woman he wants, rather than the woman herself. This relationship between gender and meaning is observed by Teresa de Lauretis in relation to *If on a winter's night a traveller*:

The pursuit of the books’ ending corresponds to the pursuit of the unattainable love object, narrative closure is impeded by *écriture*, the dispersal of meaning, writing as *différance*, and the pleasure of the text is infiltrated or intercut with the *jouissance* of the text.⁷⁷

Jouissance arises because meaning is forever deferred, an argument that recurs frequently in contemporary literary theory, although de Lauretis’ argues that this deferral occurs because of the way women and text interact within Calvino’s stories. In *If on a winter's night a traveller*, the *Lettore* is frustrated by the blank pages in the act of opening them with a knife, which suggests that the physical act of reading is an allegory of the sexual act.⁷⁸ Calvino’s novel states:

The pleasures derived from the paper knife are tactile, auditory, visual, and especially mental. Progress in reading is preceded by an act that traverses the material solidity of the book to allow you access to its incorporeal substance. Penetrating among the pages from below, the blade vehemently moves upward, opening a vertical cut in a flowing

⁷⁷ Teresa de Lauretis, ‘Reading the (Post)Modern Text: *If on a winter's night a traveler*’, in *Calvino Revisited*, pp. 131-45 (p. 137).

⁷⁸ See de Lauretis, p. 138.

succession of slashes. [...] Opening a path for yourself, with a sword's blade, in the barrier of pages, becomes linked with the thought of how much the word contains and conceals: you cut your way through your reading as if it were a dense forest.⁷⁹

This sexual act of reading evokes the idea that the Female, as Other, is also that which is blank, unreadable, and passive. We are thus left with a situation in which the deferment of reading is the *jouissance* of the frustrated sexual act, which suggests that this representation of absent femininity is not a result of *différance*, but its cause. Were absent femininity to be the result of *différance*, then it becomes emblematic and the oppositions between masculine and feminine, and meaning and deferral, break down under its very construction. It is rather the case that, as de Lauretis observes, 'Desire is founded in absence, in the tension-toward rather than the attainment of the object of love, in the delays, the displacements, the deferrals'.⁸⁰ It is because women are absent that they are desired, and it is this absence brought into existence within the text that creates the problems of interpreting it. Eurydice, the emblem of absence, is hunted by Orpheus, but never found.

Acker sees the entire matter differently and suggests that Orpheus deliberately abandons Eurydice. In Acker's version of the myth, Eurydice (You) is suffering from cancer, and Orpheus (Or) is the bohemian musician who sleeps with her. She summarises the positions of both Plato (who argues that Orpheus 'hadn't the courage to die for love') and Blanchot (who argues that Orpheus never saw Eurydice at all because 'he doesn't want her to be') and then argues that Orpheus abandoned Eurydice because she loved him.⁸¹ Orpheus writes to Eurydice that 'You loved me too much' and in a typically noncommittal male

⁷⁹ Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveller*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 42.

⁸⁰ de Lauretis, p. 132.

⁸¹ Kathy Acker, 'Eurydice in the Underworld', in *Eurydice in the Underworld* (London: Arcadia, 1997), pp. 1-26 (p. 23).

gesture, abandons her to her fate.⁸² Acker's inversion of this narrative suggests that women are absent not because they choose to be (as Calvino's stories suggest), or because they are truly Other to masculine discourse (as Pynchon suggests in *V*), but because they are made absent by the dominant power of masculine discourse. This returns us to Allen's concept of 'the necessary blankness'. Women must be absent for men to have presence – it is *necessary* to masculine discourse for femininity to be blank – and so, in a manner similar to *Love, The End of the Road*, and Erickson's fiction, women are written over to legitimate masculine discourse, which is, in the end, a '*phallus-y*'.

Masculine discourse is a '*phallus-y*' because it cannot contain or understand the 'true' nature of women. For example, Derrida, when studying Nietzsche's representation of women, argues:

There is no essence of woman because she averts and is averted from herself. Out of the depths, endless and unfathomable, she devours, enveils all essentiality, all identity, all propriety. Here philosophical discourse, blinded, founders and allows itself to be hurled down to its ruin. There is no truth of woman, but it is because of this abyssal fault of truth, because this non-truth is the 'truth.' Woman is the name of this non-truth of truth.⁸³

'Woman' cannot be contained within masculine discourse because she symbolises the destruction of masculine discourse, the point at which it is devalued. This is precisely Kristeva's point of the 'abject', which is '*neither subject nor object*' but something else, existing somewhere in the linguistic underworld that can never be brought in Orphic presence. The abject is 'a defiance or challenge to symbolization' and symbolises 'a void that is not

⁸² Acker, p. 24.

⁸³ Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. by Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 49.

nothing'.⁸⁴ The Kristevan abject, as characterised by Mark Taylor, defines the impossibility of communication because it cannot be grasped, only approached, although this also indicates an absented form of nihilism: 'The nothing that approaches without being present can only be approached indirectly. In this uncanny domain, communication inevitably is "indirect communication."' Always entangled in the play of veiling and unveiling, the author can, at best, *skirt* abjection'.⁸⁵ The violence of representation is always configured as a concrete masculine presence that 'writes over' feminine absence. To allow feminine absence to remain absent, without being characterised negatively, is therefore to be 'absent-minded'.

Being 'Absent-Minded': Silence in Postmodern Literature

If postmodernism seeks to redress the balance between presence and absence, then silence plays a special role in postmodern literature because it marks the point at which language ceases to function. It is a specific form of absence in which communication is absent. Thus, blank fiction is *silent* on the matter of ethics, and feminine absence is *silent* within male-dominated discourse. There are two political aspects to silence, however: complicit silence and 'true' silence. Martin Niemöller wrote a famous condemnation of the silence that accompanied National Socialism's rise to power:

First they came for the Communists, but I was not a Communist – so I said nothing. Then they came for the Social Democrats, but I was not a Social Democrat – so I did nothing. Then came the trade unionists, but I was not a trade unionist. And then they

⁸⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 51, 1.

⁸⁵ Mark C. Taylor, *Altarity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 160.

came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew – so I did little. Then when they came for me, there was no one left who could stand up for me.⁸⁶

In Niemöller's eyes, silence is complicit with a dominant ideology. However, within the same period, there is also a demand for silence. Blanchot calls for a silence that is ethical toward the 'disaster', saying 'It is not you who will speak; let the disaster speak in you, even if it is by your forgetfulness or silence'.⁸⁷ Lawrence Langer agrees with this, because although there is a need to speak about the Holocaust, he later admits that 'We lack the terms of discourse for such human situations'.⁸⁸ There is thus a demand for speech where speech is impossible. The result of this is seen in Levinas' critique of philosophy where the Holocaust is not represented within his works explicitly because it is a 'hole in history'.⁸⁹ Instead, Levinas emphasises the ethics that originate in the Holocaust. His concept of intrasubjective Being is the product, not the representation, of the Holocaust, and thus the non-representation of the Holocaust within Levinas' works responds to an ethical demand by the Other for it not to be presented.

This ambivalence towards silence is clearly seen in Calvino's final work, *Mr Palomar* (1983). This text encompasses many aspects of his previous writing, exploring philosophical concepts within a semi-autobiographical framework. In the chapter, 'Serpents and skulls', Palomar is guided around Tula, an ancient Toltec city. His guide continually expounds

⁸⁶ Quoted in Peter Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), p. 221. The original source is Ruth Zerner, 'Martin Niemöller, Activist as Bystander: The Oft-Quoted Reflection', in *Jewish-Christian Encounters Over the Centuries*, ed. by Marvin Perry and Frederick M. Schweitzer (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), pp. 327-40.

⁸⁷ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 4.

⁸⁸ Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New York: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 118.

⁸⁹ Quoted in Robert Eaglestone, 'From Behind the Bars of Quotation Marks: Emmanuel Levinas's (Non)-Representation of the Holocaust', in *The Holocaust and the Text: Speaking the Unspeakable*, ed. by Andrew Leak and George Paizis (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), pp. 97-108 (p. 104). The original source is Emmanuel Levinas, 'Meaning and Sense', in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1987), pp. 75-107 (p. 93).

theories on what the carvings mean, how they came about, and why they were carved. At the same time, a young teacher is guiding his class around the ruins, saying, ‘We don’t know what it means’.⁹⁰ Eventually, the two guides disagree, with Palomar’s guide telling the class a theory of what a statue means. As the young teacher walks away, he says, ‘*No es verdad*, it is not true, what that *señor* said. We don’t know what they mean’.⁹¹ Palomar’s idea about this illustrates precisely how ‘silence’ is the only ethical response to such situations:

What had first seemed only a brisk lack of interest is being revealed to him as a scholarly and pedagogical position, a methodical choice by this serious and conscientious young man, a rule from which he will not swerve. A stone, a figure, a sign, a word that reach us isolated from its context is only a stone, figure, sign or word: we can try to define them, to describe them as they are, and no more than that; whether, beside the face they show us, they also have a hidden face, it is not for us to know. The refusal to comprehend more than what the stones show us is perhaps the only way to evince respect for their secret; trying to guess is a presumption, a betrayal of that true, lost meaning.⁹²

To attempt to ‘know’ something is to contain it, and so ‘the refusal to comprehend’ is ‘the only way to evince respect for their secret’. Although Calvino realises that ‘Not to interpret is impossible, as refraining from thinking is impossible’, he also accepts that ‘all interpretation is a use of violence and caprice against a text’.⁹³ This demonstrates two possible formulations of silence: an ethical silence, which refuses to represent the Other, and one that is complicit in its downfall, because ‘In times of general silence, conforming to the silence of the majority is certainly culpable’.⁹⁴ The decision as to which is the most important aspect of silence, however, is left blank by Calvino – demonstrating the ethical demand not to interpret. His

⁹⁰ Italo Calvino, *Mr Palomar*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 87.

⁹¹ Calvino, *Mr Palomar*, p. 89.

⁹² Calvino, *Mr Palomar*, p. 88.

⁹³ Calvino, *Mr Palomar*, p. 89; Calvino, *If on a winter’s night*, p. 69.

⁹⁴ Calvino, *Mr Palomar*, p. 94.

final word on the subject of silence is perhaps the most eloquent of all because, despite Palomar's theorisation of the nature of silence, 'he bites his tongue and remains silent'.⁹⁵

This reveals that silence in the postmodern world is perhaps the only ethical response to the Other. If, as Levinas suggests, we are constructed by the Other and exist as 'being-guilty', then the Other forces us to silence ourselves. We cannot speak without silencing the Other and therefore we do not speak: the performative act of communication partakes of the violence of representation. Where such a phrase – 'the violence of representation' – is generally used to define how representation veils an object, the signifier masking the signified, there is an implicit aspect of this in the speech act itself. This is because we exist over the absence of being, or the being of absence, and in our desire to ignore this fact – and even Levinas is guilty of this – we speak, as Beckett's *The Unnamable* (1952) suggests, in 'the terror-stricken babble of the condemned to silence'.⁹⁶ Speech is thus the sentence of the sentence, not in the sense of Derrida's 'prison house of language', but because we are condemned to speak: we cannot bear to look at the abyss that yawns beneath us. Communication is accomplished at the expense of silence, and so the very act of communicating is unethical towards silence and absence.⁹⁷

Of course, it is possible to ask why we should care about absence, why there is a need to be ethical towards it through silence. The fact that without absence there is no presence – that if we are silent for too long, 'the whole fabrication might collapse' – is insufficient to justify an ethical argument of this kind.⁹⁸ This justifies why we should continue to speak

⁹⁵ Calvino, *Mr Palomar*, p. 94.

⁹⁶ Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, collected in *Molloy/Malone Dies/The Unnamable* (London: Calder, 1994), p. 357.

⁹⁷ This returns us to Boly's interpretation of deconstruction as 'speechless nihilism'. Whilst the chapter 'Postmodern Nihilism' argued that he is incorrect to assume this of deconstruction, it *is* an accurate summation of the only ethical stance left open to humanity. See page 130 of this thesis.

⁹⁸ Beckett, *Unnamable*, p. 351.

rather than be silent. However, what we ignore through our speech is what we eradicate through language: the silence in which to listen. There is an aspect of this in *Waiting for Godot*:

ESTRAGON: [...We] are incapable of keeping silent.

VLADIMIR: You're right, we're inexhaustible.

ESTRAGON: It's so we won't think.

VLADIMIR: We have that excuse.

ESTRAGON: It's so we won't hear.

VLADIMIR: We have our reasons.

ESTRAGON: All the dead voices.

VLADIMIR: They make a noise like wings.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

VLADIMIR: Like sand.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

*Silence.*⁹⁹

Vladimir and Estragon do not want to hear the silence beneath discourse because this silence is 'all the dead voices' that are 'like leaves'. This suggests the spectre of absence, 'like leaves' implying that the dead voices are all those already absent. Although both Vladimir and Estragon realise this, they cannot face this silence, as Vladimir cries out 'Say something!' and Estragon replies 'I'm trying'.¹⁰⁰

Instead of the incessant prattle of Vladimir and Estragon, in 'Texts for Nothing' (1955) Beckett writes about 'our phantoms, those of the dead, those of the living, those of those who are not born'. Being unable to face such phantoms, he continues, 'Now I'm haunted, let

⁹⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), II (p. 62).

¹⁰⁰ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, p. 63.

them go, one by one, let the last desert me and leave me empty, empty and silent'.¹⁰¹ This suggests that there are two ways of perceiving silence within Beckett. Where the first emphasises the inability of the living to listen to the dead, seen in *Waiting for Godot*, the second emphasises the desire to leave behind the phantoms of life (the once living, the living, and the to-be-living) in favour of absence. 'Texts for Nothing' therefore indicates the desire to become absent oneself: 'Only the words break the silence, all other sounds have ceased. If I were silent, I'd hear nothing'.¹⁰² When speech ceases, it is possible to hear absence.

Adorno famously wrote that 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric', arguing that it was impossible to represent the Holocaust in aesthetic terms and that silence is the only ethical response 'after Auschwitz'.¹⁰³ Adorno later changed the sentiment because 'Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems'.¹⁰⁴ This could indicate that silence is now no longer required and that the mourning period has passed, although this is not the case. Rather, Adorno *extends* the embargo to existence itself, and the question becomes whether 'after Auschwitz you can go on living' with 'the drastic guilt of him who was spared'.¹⁰⁵ Whilst Adorno means this in relation to survivors, all who 'come after' have been spared. This is an extension of the demand for silence into a demand to feel guilty for not being absent. We are present, and those that died are not – we live while they died. Such 'drastic guilt' is therefore not only the remit of survivors, but all those who live

¹⁰¹ Samuel Beckett, 'Texts for Nothing (1-13)', in *The Complete Short Prose 1929-1989*, ed. by S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1995), pp. 100-54, 5 (p. 120).

¹⁰² Beckett, 'Texts for Nothing', 8 (p. 131).

¹⁰³ Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), p. 34.

¹⁰⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 362.

¹⁰⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 363.

‘after Auschwitz’. The ethical aspect of nihilism is therefore not only in a silence that avoids the violence of representation, but also in an absence that avoids the violence of existence itself.

This radical version of an ethic of absence does not demand that we all ‘become absent’ but that we should realise that we exist at the expense of the Other (not only the present Other, but also the absent Other). Silence becomes our only method of doing so, as the ‘unnamable’ suggests:

I want it to go silent, it wants to go silent, it can't, it does for a second, then it starts again, it says that's not the real silence, what can be said of the real silence, I don't know, that I don't know what it is, that there is no such thing, that perhaps there is such a thing, yes, that perhaps there is, somewhere, I'll never know.¹⁰⁶

Although we can never know what the ‘real silence’ is, because it is anathema to us, the desire to find the place of absolute silence is vital. This is not Niemöller’s culpable silence, in which we are complicit with ideologies through our silence, but a refusal to speak, to propose, to buy, and hence ‘buy into’, the capitalist ideology, as Baudrillard writes: ‘The social order teaches you to keep quiet, it does not teach you silence’.¹⁰⁷ Niemöller suggests silence is ‘keeping quiet’ and although at times it may be, ‘true’ silence is absolutely Other to ideological control.

Although it is utopian, if everyone were silent then the ‘violence of representation’ could not occur. By choosing to withhold ourselves, to remain absent, we are being ‘absent-minded’. In perhaps the only quixotic gesture left open to us, the desire to absent ourselves

¹⁰⁶ Beckett, *Unnamable*, p. 412.

¹⁰⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories IV: 1995-2000*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2003), p. 54.

from quotidian control is only viable through our silence and our absence, as DeLillo writes in *Mao II* (1991): ‘the withheld work of art is the only eloquence left’.¹⁰⁸ This is passivity raised to the level of terrorism, where terrorism is not the active rebellion against control (which Baudrillard argues cannot occur) but the passive resistance to being controlled, a place in which ‘nothing more than nothing can be said’, the ‘great serenity’ of ‘the pure, informationless state of signal zero’.¹⁰⁹ As Hassan writes, silence is ‘an autistic consciousness, imperial in its isolation, avid for the void; a corresponding language, cunning in the arts of self-abolition; and an erotic retreat from existence, from the flesh of reality, a dark prayer of transcendence under’.¹¹⁰ Being ‘absent-minded’ is therefore an ethical response towards both the problem of existing ‘over’ nothingness and to the problem of quotidian control. Postmodern literature responds to this and ‘moves, through nihilist play or mystic transcendence, toward the vanishing point’: a ‘postmodern’ nihilism.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (London: Vintage, 1992), p. 67.

¹⁰⁹ John Cage, ‘Lecture on Nothing’, in *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (London: Marion Boyers, 1978), pp. 109-27 (p. 111); Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, p. 404.

¹¹⁰ Hassan, p. 14.

¹¹¹ Hassan, p. 23.

‘Neverland’: The Space of Nihilism

The more enlightened our houses are, the more their walls ooze ghosts. Dreams of progress and reason are haunted by nightmares.

– Italo Calvino, ‘Cybernetics and Ghosts’.¹

I imagined a clean, hard, bright city where towers reared towards the sky in a paradigm of technological aspiration [...] – a finite and succinct city where the ghosts who haunt the cities of Europe could have found no cobweb corners to roost in. But in New York I found, instead of hard edges and clean colours, a lurid Gothic darkness.

– Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*.²

As we have seen throughout this thesis, Kant, Nietzsche, and Lyotard all formulate the same question of ‘what is...?’, Kant about the ‘Enlightenment’, Nietzsche about ‘nihilism’, and Lyotard about ‘postmodernism’. At this stage, it is possible to answer all three questions: the Enlightenment is rationality, nihilism is values devaluing themselves, and postmodernism is the denial of teleological forms. ‘Enlightenment modernity’ is seen in Calvino’s dream of ‘progress and reason’ and epitomised by Carter’s ‘paradigm of technological aspiration’. Postmodernism, in contrast to these, is a ‘lurid Gothic darkness’ of ‘nightmares’. Postmodernism is a gothic form, where long-repressed ghosts emerge to haunt the system of rationality and order. In comparison to the light, ordered world of the Enlightenment, postmodernism is dark, lurid, and chaotic.

¹ Italo Calvino, ‘Cybernetics and Ghosts’, in *The Literature Machine: Essays*, trans. by Patrick Creagh (London: Vintage, 1997), pp. 3-27 (p. 19).

² Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve* (London: Virago, 1996), p. 10.

The absence of Nietzsche's definition of 'nihilism' is significant in this instance, although he does in fact appear in both quotations. As we have seen throughout this thesis, nihilism is significant to both Enlightenment modernity and postmodernism, and yet Carter and Calvino seem to be saying 'nothing' about nihilism. Nihilism is that which both Enlightenment modernity and postmodernism seek to repress and their silence, about nihilism, is telling. Nihilism emerges from values devaluing themselves, and an ideology cannot allow its own destruction. Nihilism appears, however, when we consider how Kant, Nietzsche, and Lyotard answer the questions they set themselves. Their answers, although accurate, omit to question themselves and their own forms. We cannot answer 'what' something 'is' without relying upon a certain framework for constructing the question and the answer. This framework is historico-linguistic because such questions are asked within a discourse that is both diachronic and signficatory. The only way of answering these questions is to accept the framework within which they are placed.

What emerges in relation to Calvino and Carter is therefore the principle of 'construction'. Calvino suggests an architectural paradigm when he says that 'the more enlightened our houses are, the more their walls ooze ghosts' and Carter suggests that the city is the *locus* for the shift between modernity and postmodernism. These constructions are built over something, just as the questions posed by Kant, Nietzsche, and Lyotard are constructed within discourse. That something is absence, silence, and nothingness: in short, the space of nihilism. In contrast to the perception of nihilism as the exhaustion of all possible forms, nihilism can also be understood as that which is 'written over', whether the blank page or the vacant lot. In metaphysical terms, this is the construction of Being *over* non-Being, the proposition of 'metaphysics' over 'nihilism', the devaluation of the

unthinkable by thought itself, and the production of meaning at the expense of non-meaning.

This chapter will therefore address the issue of construction of space in relation to nihilism and postmodern literature. In fact, it is the sum of the three previous literary chapters and reveals the ‘construction’ of this thesis. Where the apocalypse is the foundations upon which the postmodern house is built and the absurd is the postmodern house in which we live, ‘ethical’ absence determines how we live in this postmodern house (an extension of Jencks’ architectural paradigm for postmodernism from ‘Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern’). This chapter is therefore as much an exploration of the structure of nihilism and postmodernism presented by this thesis as it is an exploration of postmodern space itself.

Everything is Constructed: From Time to Space

Within postmodernism, space has usurped time as the measure of narratives. Although these claims are somewhat grandiose – ‘Time is obsolete. History has ended’ – they do suggest why space has become so important in the construction of postmodern narratives.³ Ursula Heise argues:

Postmodernist novels focus on the moment or the narrative present at the expense of larger temporal developments [...The] moment is not envisioned as the self-identical instant of presence, but as partaking of or leading to an indefinite number of different, alternative, and sometimes mutually exclusive temporalities.⁴

³ Ursula K. Heise, *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative, and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 11.

⁴ Heise, p. 64.

Such narrative techniques reflect the perception of time as a series of rooms in an infinite house. The postmodern author merely chooses which rooms he wishes to visit. Another aspect of spatiality is seen in Baudrillard, where the near-instantaneous transmission of data – the global communications network – means that time is no longer a factor. Baudrillard writes ‘The fact that we are leaving history to move into the realm of simulation is merely a consequence of the fact that history itself has always, deep down, been an immense simulation model’.⁵ This ‘model’ of history is merely another expression of its spatial construction. It is a structure appended to the human flow of time, a series of interlinked nodes within a consciousness of time passing. The postmodern author, according to this allegory, functions as a circuit, connecting nodes in an order that comes to represent the narrative progression of a story. This is also seen in Virilio’s definition of ‘chrono-politics’, where speed, although a function of time, has altered geography to such an extent that ‘The city of the beyond [the ‘postmodern’ city] is the City of Dead Time’.⁶ The question is therefore no longer in what chronological order narrative events occur, but how this narrative space is constructed. Within postmodern fictions, time is subordinate to space, as Erickson suggests in *Tours of the Black Clock* with a ‘map of the Twentieth Century’; in *Days Between Stations*, with ‘the blueprint of destiny’; and in *The Sea Came in at Midnight*, where the ‘various connecting timelines’ of the ‘Apocalyptic Calendar’ ‘were secret tunnels running through the mansion of memory, in which history was only a floor plan’.⁷ This indicates ‘a space in which time occurs’ rather than ‘a time in which space occurs’, designating a subject-to-object shift between spatiality and temporality within postmodern literature, and demonstrating that time is now a function of space.

⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. by Chris Turner (Oxford: Polity Press, 1994), p. 7.

⁶ Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer, *Pure War*, trans. by Mark Polizzotti (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), p. 15.

⁷ Steve Erickson, *Tours of the Black Clock* (London: Futura, 1990), p. 203; Steve Erickson, *Days Between Stations* (London: Quartet, 1997), p. 170; Steve Erickson, *The Sea Came in at Midnight* (New York: Perennial, 2000), p. 51.

The *OuLiPo* group is an example of this proliferation of space within postmodern literature. The *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* [Workshop of Potential Literature] was founded in Paris in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais, and included authors such as Alain Robb -Grillet, Georges Perec, and Italo Calvino. Warren Motte argues that the *OuLiPo* placed ‘the notion of formal constraint at the center of its aesthetic, arguing that the literary text must be a product of systematic artifice’.⁸ This ‘systematic artifice’ is itself a product of ‘spatialising’ a text. Robb -Grillet’s *Jealousy* (1957), for example, places the text within the space of a plantation house, including a floor plan of the house itself. Similarly, Perec’s *Life: A User’s Manual* (1978) deals with space, occurring within a hotel and, like *Jealousy*, includes a floor plan. Calvino’s ‘artifice’ is seen in texts such as *If on a winter’s night a traveller* and *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1969). *If on a winter’s night a traveller* incorporates the beginning of ten different novels within its structure, and *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* uses the figure of a pack of tarot cards to place a formal structure upon the text. Each of these structures refutes the idea of proposing a linear chronology for the text. Unlike the ‘traditional’ form of the novel, where the narrative proceeds through chapters in a chronological manner, these novels impose a spatial structure on the narrative.

In *Jealousy*, for example, even when the house is empty, the novel continues because the action of the characters is not as important as an examination of the dwelling space of the characters: ‘The stain has disappeared altogether. There now remains only a vaguely outlined paler area, without any apparent depression of the surface, which might pass for an insignificant defect in the finish, or worse’.⁹ This attention to the ‘insignificant’ defines the text as it aims to detail the *minutiae* of everyday life, the space that the characters inhabit, and

⁸ Warren F. Motte Jr., ‘Telling Games’, in *Calvino Revisited*, ed. by Franco Ricci (Ottawa: Dovehouse, 1989), pp. 117-30 (p. 120).

⁹ Alain Robb -Grillet, *Jealousy*, trans. by Richard Howard (Canada: Calder, 1987), p. 64.

not the characters at all. Similarly, in *Life*, Perec describes a ‘space’ that remains after its occupant has died:

Now in the little lounge what is left is what remains when there’s nothing left: flies, for instance, or advertising bumpf slipped under the door by students, proclaiming the benefits of a new toothpaste or offering twenty-five centimes’ reduction to every buyer of three packets of washing powder, or old issues of *Le Jouet Français*, the review he took all his life and to which his subscription didn’t run out until a few months after his death, or those things without meaning that lie around on floors and in cupboard corners.¹⁰

This description deals with the detritus that remains in a space when the occupant has left: again, it is the space, not the inhabitant, that is important. Perec shows that ‘those things without meaning’ actually have a meaning based upon their relation to the space in which they reside, instead of to the character that owned them. There is still something left, something that is deemed insignificant. Although ‘what is left is what remains when there’s nothing left’, this is ‘nothing’ only in relation to personal significance, not to space.

Calvino, in contrast to both Robbé-Grillet and Perec, chooses not to deal with ‘real’ or ‘domestic’ space and instead concentrates upon ‘textual’ space. *If on a winter’s night a traveller* is a metatext which contains ten microtexts, and is concerned with how the reader reads a text, and how a text is constructed, rather than with either ‘real’ space or narrative action. The predominant verb within *If on a winter’s night a traveller* is ‘to read’ and thus narrative action is the ‘action’ of reading the ‘narration’: this suggests reflexivity at the heart of the text, the ‘action’ of a text reading itself. Likewise, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* is also about the construction of meaning through reading. Travellers who arrive in the castle must relate their stories in tarot readings, because all are made mute upon entry to the castle. This is

¹⁰ Georges Perec, *Life: A User’s Manual*, trans. by David Bellos (London: Harvill Press, 1996), p. 27.

obviously connected with reading because the audience cannot listen, but only read the story in the tarot cards, and suggests a spatial element inasmuch as the process of reading is the act of 'travelling' through a narrative. The potential for narrative proliferation within both of these texts demonstrates that the reading of the story is merely a path chosen from all those possible.

The connection between reading and travelling suggests another spatial element in the creation of postmodern texts. It is not just domestic space that is important, but the space of the text itself. This is a common characteristic of postmodern texts. For example, Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* (1987) writes the story over the detritus of urban life whilst walking through the city. Reading is also akin to the 'detection' of meaning, which explains the prevalence of detective stories within postmodern fiction. For example, Borges, Calvino, Eco, Pynchon, Auster, and Haruki Murakami, all use the trope of the detection as an allegory for reading. The fact that the 'solution' is never 'truly' uncovered within the works of these authors demonstrates that postmodern fiction is concerned with narrative proliferation at the expense of any one 'transcendent' meaning of the text. The reader walks the story like a detective, although a secure reading – the object of the detection – is lost amongst the narrative choices the reader makes along the way. Time is measured only in relation to how far along a path the reader/detective is: it is not measured in hours, but in page numbers, and is thus a function of the 'space' of the text.

Narrative space, as with space generally, is constructed within certain ideological parameters. The author is the ideological lynchpin of the space of narrative, and it is therefore possible to see an ideological construction of space. Henri Lefebvre argues that space functions in an Althusserian manner, interpellating the individual into the ideology

inscribed in the space. When Lefebvre writes about monuments, we see that the immersion into the space of the cathedral reinforces a certain ideology:

Visitors are bound to become aware of their own footsteps, and listen to the noises, the singing; they must breathe the incense laden air, and plunge into a particular world, that of sin and redemption; they will partake of an ideology; they will contemplate and decipher the symbols around them; and they will thus, on the basis of their own bodies, experience a total being in total space.¹¹

Lefebvre describes the mechanism by which space replicates ideology – space is merely a symbolic representation of the ideology that constructed it. He therefore extends Althusser's concept of ISAs from the field of social relations to the physical 'space' of an ideology. The police, Althusser's example of a 'repressive' ISA, have a police station, whose space functions to 'hail' the individual within the bounds of legal ideology as 'transgressor', 'witness', or 'plaintiff', and each civilian who enters that space immediately takes on one of these functions.

This holds true for a 'postmodern' space. If one were to imagine the archetypal (aesthetic) postmodern space, it would be the discontinuous art gallery, a showcase for postmodern art in which a heterogeneous series of spaces are presented to the audience, whose movement through each stage of an exhibition would be accompanied by a shift in the construction of space.¹² Similarly, each 'stage' of an exhibition would be available from any other, refuting beginning and ending, and forcing the audience to construct their own pathways, the space itself curving, straightening, raising or lowering depending upon where

¹¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 220.

¹² Although the shopping mall is often referred to as an archetypal postmodern space, this suggests an *economic* perception of postmodernism, that is, postmodernity. In Lyotardian terms, an *aesthetic* postmodern space would be an art gallery, although this must not be museal (and thus a *reification* of culture), but a gallery that explores the limits of art itself.

you were. Furthermore, the artworks displayed would be discontinuous, incongruent with each other, installation art and video art presented alongside text, sculpture, and painting. Finally, and most importantly, such a space would be temporary, a nomadic structure that is transitory and mobile. This ‘aestheticisation’ of space would *still* reinforce the very real political ideology behind it: *it would construct the observer in such a way as to destabilise his traditional perceptions of space* – Lefebvre’s ‘total being in total space’.

The Pompidou Centre was conceived in just this way: a house for postmodern artworks that was suggestive of a ‘polyvalent interior space’.¹³ However, as Baudrillard’s analysis of the ‘Beauborg effect’ suggests, this space is itself ideologically patrolled: ‘a mobile exterior, commuting, cool and modern – an interior shrivelled by the same old cultural values’.¹⁴ The ‘Beauborg effect’ is, for Baudrillard, one of cultural decline:

Beauborg is a *monument to cultural deterrence*. Within a museal scenario that only serves to keep up the humanist fiction of culture, it is a veritable fashioning of the death of culture that takes place, and it is a veritable *cultural mourning* for which the masses are joyously gathered.¹⁵

The very fact that Beauborg is a ‘monument’ is suggestive of a concretisation of culture, reinforced by the fact that ‘Beauborg cannot even burn, everything is foreseen’.¹⁶ It is a permanent museum to a dead culture, reinforcing its ideology (itself suggesting Lefebvre’s analysis of space), and therefore ‘*the perfect circulatory operator*’.¹⁷

¹³ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 62.

¹⁴ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 62.

¹⁵ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 65.

¹⁶ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 70.

¹⁷ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 68.

Although Lefebvre's understanding of space applies to physical space, it can also apply to narrative space, as postmodern literature focuses upon a certain construction of the novel in order to achieve its aims. As a general rule, postmodern literature attempts to destabilise the reader by the use of narrative devices that confuse both the linear chronology and ontological horizon of a text. Multiple (or no) beginnings; multiple (or no) endings; shifts between narrative modes; 'impossible' events, or no events at all; metalepsis; and fragmented sentence, paragraph, and chapter construction, are all features of postmodern narrative space. Such features are common to postmodern novels, replicating the ideology of the postmodern. The reader 'inhabiting' such a text is forced into the position of being unable to read the text in any defined way, where the textual 'metanarratives' (narratives of narratives) frustrate any other ideological 'metanarrative' (Lyotard's *grande histoire*). By this mechanism, the reader becomes hailed as a discontinuous subject within 'a labyrinthine practice of signs' that is both allegorical (for postmodern culture) and literal (a text).¹⁸

In fact, space and the process of construction is an implicit aspect of any system of thought. C. F. Munro, when discussing Eco's concept of a 'Global Semantic Space', notes that Eco 'attempts to apply semiotics to architecture'.¹⁹ Although he concludes that this is not entirely successful, he does mention a 'recent work of *The Architecture Studio* in Paris':

One might say that not only does the building employ a mixture of real and false elements which playfully disrupt our normal architectural expectations, but it also effects a self-parodying cancellation of the illusion which its own regularities, like those of any building, succeed in projecting. By its 'self-focusing' it makes us aware of its own form and at the same time the limits of that form.²⁰

¹⁸ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 65.

¹⁹ C. F. Munro, 'Semiotics, Aesthetics, and Architecture', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 27:2 (1987), 115-28 (pp. 119-20). Munro quotes from Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 13.

²⁰ Munro, pp. 126-27.

Here, architecture reflects postmodern theory, replicating a postmodern space. Thus, although in Munro's view a semiotic allegory for architecture fails, an architectural paradigm for conceptual thought emerges. Such constructions, both theoretical and actual, suggest an architectural paradigm for the understanding of language. In 'Is Space Political?', Jameson writes that 'architecture can somehow never get out of politics', implying that architecture is bound up in political discourse, representing ideological struggle through the medium of space.²¹ This is, of course, similar in approach to Lefebvre's 'monumental' space. Unlike Lefebvre, however, Jameson extends the analogy towards semantics:

The words of built space, or at least its substantives, would seem to be rooms, categories which are syntactically or syncategorematically related and articulated by the various spatial verbs and adverbs – corridors, doorways, and staircases, for example, modified in turn by adjectives in the form of paint or furnishings, decoration and ornament (whose puritanical denunciation by Adolf Loos offers some interesting linguistic and literary parallels). Meanwhile, these 'sentences' – if that is indeed is what a building can be said to 'be' – are read by readers whose bodies fill the various shifter-plots and subject-positions; while the larger text into which such units are inserted can be assigned to the text-grammar of the urban as such.²²

Jameson converts architecture into sentences, and by analogy, sentences into architecture. Thus, any form of linguistically-based reasoning (by extension, any form of mental process) is thereby predicated upon the principles of construction. This is seen clearly in Wigley's definition of deconstruction, where an architectural analogy again emerges:

²¹ Fredric Jameson, 'Is Space Political?', in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. by Neil Leach (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 255-69 (p. 255). This is reprinted from *Anyplace*, ed. by Cynthia Davidson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 192-205.

²² Jameson, p. 261.

Deconstruction is [...] understood as an affirmative appropriation of structures that identifies structural flaws, cracks in the construction that have been systematically disguised, not in order to collapse those structures but, on the contrary, to demonstrate the extent to which the structures depend on both these flaws and the way in which they are disguised.²³

Deconstruction – as its very name implies – is ‘built upon’ the principle of construction. It is concerned with ‘structures’ of meaning and the way in which they are ‘constructed’. Deconstruction looks for weak points in the structure ‘not in order to collapse those structures’ but to ‘demonstrate the extent to which the structures depend on [...] these flaws [floors?]’, and is thus not about demolishing structures but inhabiting them. By playing on the Heideggerian concept of ‘dwelling’, deconstruction seeks to inhabit the ‘house’ of the text. Deconstruction reveals that the reader is always partially within the text and partially outside it – ‘partial’ in the sense of incomplete – and that the interpretation that the reader brings forth is also always ‘partial’ – in the sense that the reader prefers one reading to another.

Nothing is Constructed: From Space to Non-Space

If, as the previous section argues, ‘everything is constructed’, then nihilism must also be constructed. Throughout this thesis, it has been argued that nihilism is what Pynchon calls ‘the ideology of the Zero’ – the interpellation or reification of nothingness within a given ideological system.²⁴ This corresponds to Lefebvre’s concept of ‘ideological space’ because a *non-constructed* space is impossible to conceive – it is radically different from the way we think.

²³ Mark Wigley, ‘The Domestication of the House: Deconstruction after Architecture’, in *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts*, ed. by Peter Brunette and David Wells (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 203-27 (p. 207).

²⁴ Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 149.

Because we exist, we cannot conceive of that which does not exist without somehow incorporating it into Being. Perec, for example, tries to conceptualise ‘A space without a use’:

I have tried several times to think of an apartment in which there would be a useless room, absolutely and intentionally useless. It wouldn't be a junkroom, it wouldn't be an extra bedroom, or a corridor, or a cubby-hole, or a corner. It would be a functionless space. It would serve for nothing, relate to nothing.

For all my efforts, I found it impossible to follow this idea through to the end. Language itself, seemingly, proved unsuited to describing this nothing, this void, as if we could only speak of what is full, useful and functional.

A space without a function. Not ‘without any precise function’ but precisely without any function; not pluri-functional (everyone knows how to do that), but a-functional. It wouldn't obviously be a space intended solely to ‘release’ the others (lumber-room, cupboard, hanging space, storage space, etc.) but a space, I repeat, that would serve no purpose at all.²⁵

Perec tries to imagine a space ‘without a function’, a space unlike any other previously conceived because space is functionalist: not a domestic space, co-opted into the principle of ‘dwelling’, but a purely heterotopian space. For example, Perec writes that a staircase is a ‘neutral place that belongs to all and to none’ and is ‘an anonymous, cold, and almost hostile place’, but even this is a space of transit, not a null-space.²⁶ Although a staircase and landing are utterly distinct from where the inhabitants of the hotel ‘entrench themselves in their domestic dwelling space’, it is still a space with a *function*.²⁷

Nihilism is therefore a space of presence, a space in which absence is brought into functionalist, ideological space. As such then, a ‘postmodern’ nihilism would replicate the use that postmodernism finds for nothingness. In terms of postmodern narrative space, there are two possibilities present for this ‘postmodern nihilism’, both of which are

²⁵ Georges Perec, ‘Species of Spaces’, in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. by John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 1-96 (p. 33).

²⁶ Perec, *Life*, p. 3.

²⁷ Perec, *Life*, p. 3.

unknowingly alluded to by Calvino, when he writes about the possible development of literature in the twenty-first century:

Will the literature of the fantastic be possible in the twenty-first century, with the growing inflation of prefabricated images? Two paths seem to open from now on. (1) We could recycle used images in a new context that changes their meaning. Postmodernism may be seen as the tendency to make ironic use of the stock images of the mass media, or to inject the taste for the marvelous inherited from literary tradition into narrative mechanisms that accentuate its alienation. (2) We could wipe the slate clean and start from scratch. Samuel Beckett has obtained the most extraordinary results by reducing visual and linguistic elements to a minimum, as if in a world after the end of the world.²⁸

This signifies a dichotomy within postmodernism itself. On the one hand, postmodernism recycles old images in new formulations (it may be ecocritically friendly, after all), while on the other, it reduces ‘visual and linguistic elements to a minimum’. Both are post-apocalyptic scenarios because one recycles the ruins of literary texts, and the other shows ‘a world after the end of the world’.

This duality of postmodern literature is also seen in the debate, within *OuLiPo* writing, between constraint and openness. In contrast to Motte’s prior perception of the ‘formal constraint’ at the heart of the *OuLiPo*, Albert Sbragia notes a ‘nihilistic tendency’ in Robb e-Grillet’s narrative abandonment to objectivity and disorder.²⁹ This debate is fundamentally concerned with the architecture. ‘Constraint’, Sbragia’s interpretation of Calvino’s writing, suggests Bachelard’s conception of an ‘*inner immensity*’ in which ‘immensity is the movement of motionless man’, that is, man ‘at home’ in his house perceiving vast images of space.³⁰ It suggests a house with infinite rooms because although infinity is present, it is represented

²⁸ Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. by Patrick Creagh (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), p. 95.

²⁹ Albert Sbragia, ‘Italo Calvino’s Ordering of Chaos’, *MFS*, 39:2 (1993), 283-306 (p. 292).

³⁰ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), pp. 184-85.

within tightly defined boundaries. In contrast, Sbragia's view of Robb -Grillet's writing is 'openness', an infinity that exists without constraint, an infinite blankness in which no meaning is ever found.³¹ Although there are numerous problems with Sbragia's argument (it is not entirely accurate to argue that Robb -Grillet demonstrates this 'nihilistic tendency' and Calvino is himself prone to this), the distinction is clear: constraint leading to proliferation of meaning is non-nihilistic, while openness suggests a nihilistic narrative dissolution.

This debate between constraint and openness can therefore be reformulated into a distinction between *excess* and *absence*. Constraint leads towards an 'excess' of narratives whereas openness leads to an 'absence' of narrative. Furthermore, absence and excess are themselves terms in the argument over postmodern literature as 'the literature of exhaustion', especially in relation to a post-apocalyptic understanding of postmodernism.³² Thus, whilst 'openness' and 'absence' are nihilistic, so too are 'constraint' and 'excess'. This 'excessive' nihilism is seen in Massimo Cacciari's definition of 'the architecture of nihilism': 'Within its own language, its originality, the architecture of nihilism, in short, believes every root, form, and traditional symbolic measure to be totally exhausted'.³³ This nihilistic exhaustion, similar to that identified by Barth, is found in postmodern literature in the recycling of used images. Cacciari unintentionally identifies the 'architecture' of postmodern literature when he reveals that 'It is as though the city were transformed into a chance of the road, a context of routes, a labyrinth without center, an absurd labyrinth'.³⁴ This is directly

³¹ Those of a mathematical bent will appreciate this 'bounded' infinity. It is equivalent to the set of prime numbers, which is a 'smaller' infinity than of all whole numbers. Thus, the integer sequence (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, ...) carries on for infinity, as do prime numbers, but they occur more rarely (1, 2, 3, 5, 7, ...). Although the boundary that defines the occurrence of prime numbers (the general formula for all primes) has yet to be found, in theory this suggests a 'bounded' infinity in contrast to the 'open' infinity of integers.

³² See John Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion', in *Surfiction: Fiction Now...And Tomorrow*, ed. by Raymond Federman (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), pp. 19-33.

³³ Massimo Cacciari, *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture*, trans. by Stephen Sartarelli (New York: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 204.

³⁴ Cacciari, p. 200.

applicable to postmodern literature – postmodern narratives tend towards meaninglessness because of the proliferation of ‘readerly’ routes through the text.

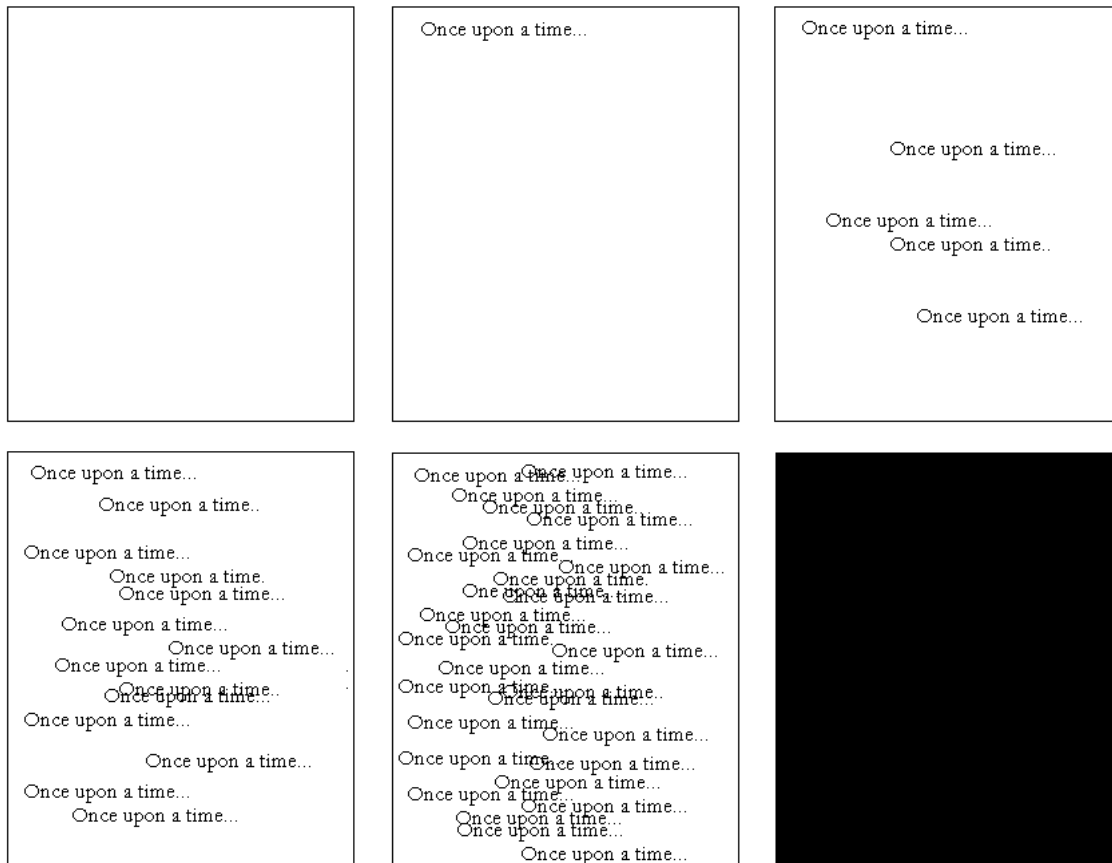
Such a reading reinforces the idea that narrative proliferation leads to the ‘nihilist problematic’ that recurs throughout this thesis – too many choices and not enough direction – although this is only one formulation of nihilism within postmodern literature. As the previous chapter examined, silence is also an important part of literature. It is the means by which meaning is communicated, that which gives structure to the whole because ‘if words run together the reader must create his own spaces in order to understand the sentence’. Furthermore, silence is that which exists before a text, the blank page over which the house of the text is constructed. As Calvino writes in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*: ‘The kernel of the world is empty, the beginning of what moves the universe is the space of nothingness, around absence is constructed what exists’.³⁵ Thus, unlike Cacciari’s definition of the ‘architecture of nihilism’ as exhaustion, it is also possible to see nihilism as the (lack of) architecture *before* construction. The literary text follows a similar process, uniting many of the concepts in this thesis. Later in the text, Calvino writes: ‘No, the Moon is a desert. [...] From this arid sphere every discourse and every poem sets forth; and every journey through forests, battles, treasures, banquets, bedchambers, brings us back here, to the center of an empty horizon’.³⁶ This suggests the blank desert about which Pynchon writes: ‘We are obsessed with building labyrinths, where before there was open plain and sky. To draw ever more complex patterns on the blank sheet. We cannot abide that *openness*: it is terror to us’.³⁷ It also suggests the passive, absent femininity of Carter: ‘She was a perfect woman; like the

³⁵ Italo Calvino, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 97.

³⁶ Calvino, *Castle of Crossed Destinies*, p. 39.

³⁷ Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 264.

moon, she only gave off reflected light'.³⁸ There are thus two potential formulations of nihilism within postmodern literature, both of which are predicated upon the construction of the postmodern text:



8.1 Nihilism and Narrative Proliferation

Each panel shows the formation of narrative strands within a text. The first page is blank – ‘nihilism’ in the sense that it is that which exists before the construction of textual space ‘over’ it. This is, of course, common to all narratives. As the narrative progresses, however,

³⁸ Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve* (London: Virago, 1996), p. 34.

we see a divergence between ‘postmodern’ and ‘modernist’ texts.³⁹ ‘Modernist’ texts are those that form only one narrative, and no matter what originality they develop within that narrative, remain trapped within one narrative – they are *monographic*. In contrast, postmodern narratives promote the proliferation of narratives within a text – they are *polygraphic*. This ‘polygraphy’ leads to nihilism in the sense that meaning is indeterminate because of the sheer multiplicity of paths through a narrative – Goudsblom’s ‘nihilist problematic’. The first formulation of nihilism is ‘absent’, because it is the space before construction; the second is ‘excessive’, and arises from the proliferation of narratives. Where the excessive formulation leads to an apocalyptic nihilism, a form of nihilism that is already ‘post-Being’ and concerned with its destruction, the absent formulation suggests nihilism that is ‘pre-becoming’, before even becoming becomes Being.

Nihilism ‘at the Door’ of the Textual House

Nihilism – as silence – is that which exists before the text. Continuing the architectural paradigm, silence is therefore that which the textual house ‘writes over’: the text-as-house is constructed over nothingness, the verbal edifice covering silence. The textual house is a common occurrence within postmodern fiction. Postmodern narrative proliferation, for example, is revealed in Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse*, where each story is a room in the house of the text in which the reader is lost. This is part of the American tradition of writing about houses within the figure of a house:

³⁹ This use of the term ‘modernist’ refers to the fourth chapter of this thesis, where ‘modernist nihilism’ was contrasted to ‘postmodern nihilism’, and not to the school of modernism, although this reading is in some ways applicable to those works that have been called ‘modernist’.

Houses [...] reflect not only the psychological structure of the main character or the social structures in which he is entrapped but the structure of the text itself, thereby setting up a four-way, and ultimately self-referential analogy among writer, text, character, and house. The same architectural habit of mind that designs and builds a house both to reflect patterns within it and to configure life in certain patterns may design a narrative to reflect and recast what the author conceives to be the essential structures of our lives.⁴⁰

This differs from the tradition identified by Arnold Weinstein in *Nobody's Home*, in which 'Nobody's Home' is to be understood both as 'Nobody is Home', 'a formula for the empty shell called self' and as 'The Home of Nobody', in which America is, 'the ghost land, the home that ghosts build to become real'.⁴¹ We can thus identify that the house (as text) is an ideological construction that the architect-author creates in order to 'configure life in certain patterns' in order for such desires 'to become real'. Houses thus reflect the psychological desires of their architects and, ultimately, their inhabitants.

The house concretises the individual, in many ways following Lefebvre's ideological space, but in a more muted manner. Although the architect designs the house (in effect acting as a filter for a given ideology of the construction of the house, in much the same way as an author acts as a filter for a given ideology of literature), the inhabitants re-write the space of the house. Thus, whilst they are interpellated within a given ideological space of the house, they are allowed to interpellate themselves within this space, reflexively allowing them to create and reflect their own identity as they wish to see it. As Bachelard suggests, the house is primarily a space of shelter: 'the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace'.⁴² He continues:

⁴⁰ Marilyn R. Chandler, *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 3.

⁴¹ Arnold Weinstein, *Nobody's Home: Speech, Self, and Place in American Fiction from Hawthorne to DeLillo* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 4.

⁴² Bachelard, p. 6.

Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and those of life. It is body and soul. It is the human being's first world. Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected.⁴³

Being is protected within the space of the house, its walls defending interiority from exteriority. The metaphysical house thereby protects us from the nihilistic 'outside', a hermetic shell in which Being can flourish, although there is a problem involved in the space of the house (both as house and text-as-house): how to live within this space. Wigley observes:

What we unproblematically take to be the space of the house (as the paradigm of space itself) is seen both to emerge from and veil a prior and more fundamental condition from which we have become alienated [...] The alienating space of the home veils a more fundamental and primordial homelessness. To be at home in such a space is precisely to be homeless.⁴⁴

This highlights the problem of why we construct our houses. The reason is, quite simply, in order to escape homelessness. However, the very act of building a house builds over something else, and so the very act of its construction admits the fundamental homelessness from which we try to escape. When Heidegger writes that 'The history of Being begins, indeed necessarily, *with the forgetting of Being*', it is this very aspect of the house to which he is referring.⁴⁵ The *Unheimlich* [uncanny] is that which is repressed by the construction of Being, and resurfaces to come and knock at the door.

⁴³ Bachelard, p. 7.

⁴⁴ Wigley, p. 208.

⁴⁵ Martin Heidegger, 'The Word of Nietzsche: "God is Dead"' in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. by William Lovitt (New York: Garland Press, 1978), pp. 53-112 (p. 109).

Indeed, this becomes clear when a certain guest visits the house. Nietzsche, in *The Will to Power*, wrote ‘Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this uncanniest of all guests?’.⁴⁶ Nietzsche was speaking of nihilism waiting to enter European culture, but this very formulation suggests an architectural paradigm, a space in which, as Jean-Michel Rey has observed, nihilism is an *hôte*, a paradoxical term invoking both ‘guest’ and ‘host’, but which is also, ‘the most *unheimlich* – the most uncanny, the most disquieting, the most frightening – of all *hôtes*’.⁴⁷ Nihilism, as the guest at the door of Being, destabilises the house that Being has constructed. The significant architectural figure for nihilism is therefore the figure of (at?) the door, as Rey writes:

The door is the site – the *topos* – where meaning is prepared, in a moment when nothing is yet, strictly speaking, fixed or determined: the very space of indetermination which is capable of becoming (on a mere sign) determination; perhaps also the site of what is insane.⁴⁸

Nihilism-as-*hôte* appears at the door in Rey’s essay, where he writes that, ‘At the door there is someone whom we know and yet who is disquieting [...] At the door there is someone with whom, despite the signs, we have a contradictory relation’.⁴⁹ The very fact that the door signifies the site where meaning is decided demonstrates that the door is the point at which nihilism enters into conflict with meaning (metaphysics).

This *hôte*, the etymological predecessor of ‘hotel’ as the space for *hôtes*, suggests a dual function of nihilism. The first is the nihilism within the structure itself: the text as ‘hotel’

⁴⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), §1 (p. 7)

⁴⁷ Jean-Michel Rey, ‘Nihilism and Autobiography’, in *Nietzsche and the Rhetoric of Nihilism: Essays on Interpretation, Language and Politics*, ed. by Tom Darby, Béla Egged, and Ben Jones (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1989), pp. 23-36 (p. 29).

⁴⁸ Rey, p. 29.

⁴⁹ Rey, p. 30.

contains the *hôte* of nihilism as a guest who is both strange and familiar, and shows that nihilism is a visitor to Perec's *Life*. Every text somehow contains nihilism within it – nihilism is 'interior' to the very interiority of the textual house. This is what deconstruction calls the 'nihilism' implicit to any metaphysical structure – the point at which the structure undermines itself – and what Sartre means when he writes that nothingness 'lies coiled at the heart of being': inside of Being, in the interior of the interior, lies nothingness.⁵⁰ The second function of nihilism-as-*hôte* is the exteriority denied by the interiority of the structure – that against which the house is built to protect.⁵¹ This interpretation reveals nihilism to be 'otherwise' to the text, or that which the text ignores in an attempt to produce meaning. When what is ignored comes knocking at the door, when exteriority meets interiority, a conflict occurs:

We absorb a mixture of being and nothingness. The center of 'being-there' wavers and trembles. Intimate space loses its clarity, while exterior space loses its void, void being the raw material of being. We are banished from the realm of possibility.⁵²

The appearance of nihilism at the door banishes Being 'from the realm of possibility' and dissolves the structure of the house. When our interiority is 'invaded' by the Other, we lash out and attempt to contain the 'outsider'. Murakami's 'Little Green Monster' (1993) is an example of this, when a little green monster invades the home of a housewife. In response,

⁵⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 21. Hassan's use of this phrasing in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) indicates the connection between postmodernism and nihilism: 'The postmodern spirit lies coiled within the great corpus of modernism' (p. 139). Postmodernism is therefore equivalent to the 'nothingness' implicit in the 'being' of modernism.

⁵¹ This supports the perception of nihilism as an 'Other' more strongly than absolute interiority can, for as Blanchot writes, the Other is 'always coming from the outside' – Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 56.

⁵² Bachelard, p. 218.

she mentally torments the creature until ‘the eyes dissolved into emptiness, and the room filled with the darkness of night’.⁵³ This unethical treatment of the Other epitomises how Being treats the nihilistic Other: we jealously (with our own ‘little green monster’) guard our own existence. Nihilism is that which Being must always repress in order to maintain its cohesion and when the ‘excluded’ nihilism comes knocking at the door, ‘bad shit’ happens.⁵⁴

This is seen clearly in Mark Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000). Within *House of Leaves*, the primary narrative of the three within the text is that of ‘The Navidson Record’. This narrative is a transcript of video footage of explorations ‘into’ the house on Ash Tree Lane that arise because of strange alterations to the house when the Navidson family go away for a weekend (the creation of a house-within-a-house). One of the major mysteries of the text is the appearance of a mysterious door inside the house. Behind the door is a room in which ‘the walls are perfectly smooth and almost pure black – “almost” because there is a slight grey quality to the surface. The space cannot be more than five feet wide and at most four feet long’.⁵⁵ This blank space, indicative of nihilism, goes on to expand throughout the text to impossible dimensions, ‘impossible’ because it does not fit within the structural space of the house. One of the most significant aspects of the creation of this door is the fact that, according to motion-sensitive cameras, nothing had altered since the Navidson family’s departure and so the door seems ‘almost as if it had been there all along’.⁵⁶

The creation of the door in *House of Leaves* is the opening of nihilism into the text; it is through this door, as both ‘movement through’ and as ‘mechanism by which’, nothingness (nihilism) comes into conflict with Being (metaphysics). It is, in Navidson’s brother’s words,

⁵³ Haruki Murakami, ‘The Little Green Monster’, trans. by Jay Rubin, in *The Elephant Vanishes*, trans. by Alfred Birnbaum and Jay Rubin (London: Harvill, 2001), pp. 151-56 (p. 156).

⁵⁴ Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (London: Picador, 1979), p. 125.

⁵⁵ Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (Bath: Anchor Press, 2000), p. 28.

⁵⁶ Danielewski, p. 28.

‘a goddamn spatial rape’.⁵⁷ Rey’s door, at which nihilism is knocking, could indeed be the very same door that appears at the Navidson house, provoking the disastrous clash between Being (the world in which Navidson lives) and Non-Being (the space upon which the House resides). Within the space of nihilism (interior to the house itself), there is a desire for exteriority, as if within an absolute interiority, beneath even the interiority of presence:

This desire for exteriority is no doubt further amplified by the utter blankness found within. Nothing there provides reason to linger. In part because not one object, let alone fixture or other manner of finish work has ever been discovered there.⁵⁸

This absolute interiority is also realised by Johnny Truant (the author of the third narrative layer), where he writes that when faced with nihilism you are ‘fighting with everything you’ve got not to face the thing you most dread, what is now, what will be, *what has always come before*, the creature you truly are, the creature we all are, *buried in the nameless black of the name*’ (my emphasis).⁵⁹

The three narratives (and ‘editorial’ alterations) that create *House of Leaves* form different levels of the figure of a house (basement, ground floor, first floor, loft).⁶⁰ Such a trope means that *House of Leaves* is both about a ‘House of Leaves’ (a house in which there are multiple absences, or a fragile figure of a house built out of leaves) and is a ‘house of leaves’ (a text).⁶¹ In this respect, it is part of the American tradition of writing about houses:

⁵⁷ Danielewski, p. 55.

⁵⁸ Danielewski, p. 119.

⁵⁹ Danielewski, p. xxiii.

⁶⁰ Within *House of Leaves*, every occurrence of the word ‘house’, in whatever language, appears in a different colour, which has been repeated here throughout the body of the chapter to demonstrate the absent-presence of the house.

⁶¹ The text also presents the idea that the world is in some way this fragile ‘house of leaves’ in the Zampanò (the writer of the second narrative layer) appendix to the text: ‘this great blue world of ours / seems a house of leaves / moments before a wind’ (Danielewski, p. 563).

in all other respects, however, it differs significantly. It differs from the ‘homelessness or rootlessness’ that Chandler observes in recent American fiction, where ‘the absence of house and home becomes a significant, defining situation of the story’ because within *House of Leaves* it is the absence of the house *within* the house that is important.⁶² Similarly, despite the fact that Weinstein admits a suspicion ‘that nothingness is primal, that Nobody lurks within all selves’, he is concerned with the way in which ghosts have built a tradition, and not with the fact that the tradition may have actually built over some ghosts in the process.⁶³

House of Leaves does not therefore formulate an architectural reality with the goal of reifying that reality (as seen in prior discussions of the space of the house). Rather, Danielewski seeks to undermine this process of reification, the very process implicit in the creation of the House, and reintroduce the space that existed prior to its creation: the absence within the text. Danielewski writes:

The walls are endlessly bare. Nothing hangs on them, nothing defines them. They are without texture. Even to the keenest eye or most sentient fingertip, they remain unreadable. You will never find a mark there. No trace survives. The walls obliterate everything. They are permanently absolved of all record. Oblique, forever obscure and unwritten. Behold the perfect pantheon of absence.⁶⁴

Although the entire process of narration is as much about constructing a house as it is constructing a narrative (a house of leaves), so too is the act of reading. We begin to understand that by reading and ‘inhabiting’ the text we are complicit with the construction of the house’s ‘meaning’. The inhabitation of the House by the reader of *House of Leaves* is not

⁶² Chandler, p. 19.

⁶³ Weinstein, p. 5.

⁶⁴ Danielewski, p. 423.

the nostalgic harmony of the domestic sphere, but the experience of being both a stranger and a friend to this space of the House.

Structurally, both the text and the House realise the extent to which they are founded upon a blank space and complicit with the notion of containing, destroying, and eradicating, through their presence, any sense of the nothingness that existed before. This is the intent of all Being, all presence: to eradicate the trace of non-Being, of non-presence. Being overwrites non-Being in order to justify its own existence, realising as it does so that it eradicates that which justifies it. Navidson's desire to re-enter the House, despite the tragedies that have occurred, is the desire to 'read' the House and 'understand' it, to appropriate and contain the radical Otherness that exists within the House.⁶⁵ This conflation of representation and presence, combined with Navidson's desire to film this ultimate interiority suggests that 'The rational study of the real is just like the movies; the *tabula rasa* is only a trick whose purpose is to deny particular absences any active value'.⁶⁶ Navidson is attempting to make this absence more concrete by the act of filming it, placing it into what Baudrillard would call the 'orders of the image'. He is denying absence the right to actively remain absent by forcing it into a measure of passivity in relation to the Real (reel?).

This is transferable to our reading of the House, in which we desire to read 'something' into the House because we cannot tolerate its absence. Our desire to enter the textual 'House' is much the same as Navidson's, because it is through interpretation that we bring this House into Being. The House continually resists such readings, however, through

⁶⁵ This corresponds mainly to the *faux*-critical Kellog-Antwerk Claim (within the text) that Navidson wishes to possess the House, although there are two other dominant theories present; the Bister-Freiden-Josephson Criteria in which Navidson 'sought nothing less than to see the house exact its annihilating effects on his own being' (Danielewski, p. 387), and the Haven-Slocum theory, which assesses the psychological impact of the House upon Navidson (see Danielewski, pp. 385-407). In this respect, perhaps this interpretation of the House should be called the Slocumbe 'Haven' Theory, as it proposes that within the House there is a haven for nothingness.

⁶⁶ Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, trans. by Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), p. 31.

the appearance of deconstructive elements within the text, stopping our reading before it starts. It is impossible to live in this House and there is no ‘dwelling in the text’ by the reader:

And therein lies the lesson of the house, spoken in syllables of absolute silence, resounding within him like a faint and uncertain echo ... *If we desire to live, we can only do so in the margins of that place.*⁶⁷

The idea that ‘*If we desire to live, we can only do so in the margins of that place*’ reveals that life (Being) is untenable within the House. It is not conditional upon the House – in which case Danielewski would have written, ‘*If we desire to live [in the House]*’ – but solely upon existence itself – ‘*If we desire to live [at all]*’. We cannot approach what this house means as inhabitant-readers, as with previous House-texts, but only from the outside, looking in, as *House of Leaves* invites us in only to show us that we cannot live within its walls and then repels us again. We cannot dwell within this text, but only dwell upon it, building up our own interpretation of what it means. We haunt the House, just as ‘*nothingness haunts being*’.⁶⁸

Haunting the Textual House: The Space of Nihilism

Not only do we haunt the textual house, but so too does nihilism. It stands outside discourse (or interior to the structure of discourse itself) and can never be brought into being. The use and description of nothingness within postmodern texts therefore implies the inability of language to approach nothing and that nothingness can only haunt the literary text. Donald Barthelme’s short story ‘Nothing: A Preliminary Account’ (1974) demonstrates the

⁶⁷ Danielewski, pp. 387-88.

⁶⁸ Sartre, p. 16.

impossibility of ever achieving an understanding of nothingness, arguing that even if we cannot know what nothingness *is*, we can at least argue what it *is not*. The narrative opens:

It's not the yellow curtains. Nor curtain rings. Nor is it the bran in a bucket, not bran, nor is it the large, reddish farm animal eating the bran from the bucket, his wife, or the raisin-faced banker who's about to foreclose on the farm. None of these is nothing.⁶⁹

The reader immediately comes to realise that these things are not nothing but something, and are arguably something important. To say dismissively, 'It's nothing' does not therefore do justice to any of these things and is incorrect. Barthelme also rejects linguistic accounts of nothingness, saying that, 'It's not an "O" or an asterisk or what Richard is thinking or that thing we can't name at the moment but which we use to clip papers together'.⁷⁰ 'Nothing' is here neither the replacement of language, nor any particular absence. Furthermore:

And it is not what is under the bed because even if you tell us 'There is nothing under the bed' and we think, *At last! Finally! Pinned to the specimen board!* still you are only informing us of a local, only temporarily stable situation, you have not delivered nothing itself.⁷¹

Barthelme argues that nothing cannot be found in the *aporiae* of language. When language cannot deliver a concept, or indicates the absence of something not really present, these are only 'little' nothings, not nothingness itself. Even though these indicate an absence of something (else), they are not accounts of nothing.

⁶⁹ Donald Barthelme, 'Nothing: A Preliminary Account', in *Sixty Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1993), pp. 245-48 (p. 245).

⁷⁰ Barthelme, p. 246.

⁷¹ Barthelme, p. 247.

Likewise, Barthelme rejects traditional scientific and philosophical accounts of nothingness, or at least popular understandings of these concepts. He continues, 'Nothing is not a telephone number or any number whatsoever including zero. It's not science and in particular it's not black-hole physics, which is not nothing but physics'.⁷² Here we see that even the notion of absence within science and mathematics ('the zero') or the absence/destruction of physical matter within a black hole is not 'nothing' either (black holes are, in fact, 'singularities'). He also interestingly rejects the notion of nihilism as nothingness: 'It is not the nihilism of Gorgias, who asserts that nothing exists and even if something did not exist it could not be known and even if it could be known that knowledge could not be communicated, no, it's not that although the tune is quite a pretty one'.⁷³ When Barthelme moves on to Heidegger and Sartre, about arguments in which the, 'Nothing nothings', or not, as the case may be, Barthelme points out that, 'What Heidegger thinks about nothing is not nothing', demonstrating that the very act of Heidegger thinking about nothing in no way delineates what nothing may be.⁷⁴

Throughout 'Nothing', in fact, Barthelme rejects the notion of thinking about nothing and prefers instead the 'homelier task' of 'making a list'.⁷⁵ This list, which is the story, is merely a preliminary task to the grand task of listing everything that nothing is not. However, as Barthelme points out, no matter how many people are helping, there remains the problem of completion:

And even if we were able, with much labor, to exhaust the possibilities, get it all inscribed, name everything nothing is not, down to the last rogue atom, the one that

⁷² Barthelme, p. 246.

⁷³ Barthelme, p. 246.

⁷⁴ Barthelme, p. 247.

⁷⁵ Barthelme, p. 247.

rolled behind the door, and had thoughtfully included ourselves, the makers of the list, on the list – the list itself would remain. Who’s got a match?⁷⁶

Barthelme raises the spectre of Russell’s Paradox here, a paradox connected with set theory where there is a set that should both include itself in itself, and should not. Nothingness is this paradox, that which cannot be brought into Being and yet is, and Barthelme finally concludes that ‘Nothing must be characterized in terms of its non-appearances, no shows, incorrigible tardiness. Nothing is what keeps us waiting (forever)?’⁷⁷

This complete failure to ever grasp ‘nothing’ is realised in Mark Taylor’s work on the ‘not’, which is concerned with the ‘appearance’ of ‘nothing’ within discourse. Taylor suggests that there is a fundamental gap between the ‘not’ (nothingness) and our ability to represent this linguistically, whether in thought, speech, or writing. He argues:

To think the not is not, however, to think not as such. The elusive complexity of the not can only be thought when reflection bends back on itself and becomes reflexive. Through this inward turn, which is intended to bring reflection full circle, thought inadvertently betrays itself by indirectly soliciting something it cannot comprehend. [...] To think not is to linger with a negative, which, though it can never be negated is not merely negative. The not is something like a non-negative negative that nonetheless is not positive. So understood, the not does not exist. Neither something nor nothing, the not falls *between* being and nonbeing.⁷⁸

The ‘not’ is a ‘knot’ that cannot be comprehended by thought. In the manner of a Zen *koan* (a riddle that reason cannot solve, such as ‘What is the sound of one hand clapping?’), Taylor proposes a riddle to the reader – how do we conceptualise that which is impossible to conceptualise? Any form of representation automatically forces the ‘not’ into a form of

⁷⁶ Barthelme, p. 247.

⁷⁷ Barthelme, p. 248.

⁷⁸ Mark C. Taylor, *nOts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 1.

presence which it does not, on its own, possess. We are left with the ‘incorrigible tardiness’ of nothing, merely waiting for Godot.

It is possible to show where to start such the process of understanding the knot of the not, although not where it finishes. Alongside those presented by Taylor, the not can also be approached (but never reached) by thinking of the ‘either/or’ and ‘both/and’ constructions that have previously been examined. Modernist nihilism – that which is concerned with negation of existing concepts – can be understood as the negative of the either/or: neither/nor. This formulation demonstrates that where modernism, for example, proposes a work of art to be *either* good *or* bad, modernist nihilism would argue that art is *neither* good *nor* bad and that there is no such thing as ‘art’ anyway. It is with the case of ‘postmodern nihilism’, however, that problems start. Where postmodernism proposes a both/and world, the sublime being created ‘between’ the two oppositions entailed by such a formulation, the ‘non-negative negative that nonetheless is not positive’ proposed by Taylor would negate each term in the both/and without being the straightforward ‘neither/nor’. Both terms remain in a negated ‘both/and’ with only a residual presence, neither positive, nor negative.

This residual formulation of nihilism is Baudrillard’s ‘remainder of the remainder’, a formulation that leads to a ‘trace’ of nihilism.⁷⁹ This is reminiscent of the Levinasian ‘trace’, which again suggests a link between Levinasian ethics and nihilism:

As it [the trace] is a mark of the effacement of a mark that was already the mark of an absence (or if you will, the effacement of the mark of effacement), it is a double effacement, a double erasure, a re-mark and a re-tracing (*un re-trait*). [...] Belonging to an immemorial past and accessible to no present, this trace is outside the presence/absence

⁷⁹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 143.

dyad. It is, as Levinas puts it, ‘the presence of that which properly speaking has never been there’.⁸⁰

This trace is the trace of nihilism, or, that which ‘properly speaking, has never been there’, that which belongs ‘to an immemorial past’ and is accessible ‘to no present’. As with Navidson’s excursion into the ‘House of Leaves’, in which ‘he will vanish completely in the wings of his own wordless stanza’, the trace of nihilism undoes itself even as it is written.⁸¹

This is not a purely abstract discussion, because William Little finds Taylor’s ‘not’ when reading Auster’s *New York Trilogy*. For him, the ‘not’ entails, rather like Barthelme, an account that is always ‘preliminary’:

Any account of nothing is inevitably preliminary or incomplete because nothing is the always improper name for that which, in philosophical terms, resists being appropriated or apprehended by thought. Always lying at the limit of absolute knowledge, nothing is wholly Other – a radical heterogeneity, an irreducible difference, an unreclaimable remainder. Neither presence nor absence, neither being nor nonbeing, neither identity nor difference, neither inside nor outside, nothing is (yet is not) utter (yet unutterable) waste. As refuse refusing to be re-fused into the productive economy of the known, nothing remains the unnameable residue at the margins of any field of representation.⁸²

This appearance of the ‘not’ in Auster’s works is most significant in the character of Quinn. Quinn appears in *The New York Trilogy* as the detective who assumes the identity of ‘Paul Auster’, not a narratorial avatar of the author, but a character disguised as the author within the text. He also appears throughout Auster’s other books. In *Moon Palace* (1989), there is a

⁸⁰ Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), p. 28. The quotation is from Emmanuel Levinas, ‘The Trace of the Other’, trans. by Alphonso Lingis, in *Deconstruction in Context*, ed. by Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 345-359 (p. 358). Robbins does note, however, that absence ‘is the only possible representation of the trace within the realm of appearances’ (p. 28, n. 9).

⁸¹ Danielewski, p. 484.

⁸² William G. Little, ‘Nothing to Go On: Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*’, *Contemporary Literature*, 38:1 (1997), 133-63 (pp. 135-36).

‘Quinn’s Bar & Grill’; in *Mr Vertigo* (1994), ‘Daniel Quinn’ is the narrator’s nephew; and in *In the Country of Last Things*, the passport of a man named Quinn is found.⁸³ The reader can never be sure whether this is the same ‘Quinn’ or not. If it is the same ‘Quinn’, this suggests an internal narrative cohesion of ‘Auster’s America’, although ‘Quinn’ could also just be a coincidental name within Auster’s fiction. As such, the appearance of ‘Quinn’ suggests a point of rupture in these texts in which it is an empty signifier, an indication or trace of the Other within the text itself: the ‘not’.

This emerges clearly when Quinn is compared to the character of Fanshawe within *The New York Trilogy*. Fanshawe appears in the final story, ‘The Locked Room’, and signifies complete authorial control over the text: the very first phrase in ‘The Locked Room’ states ‘It seemed to me that Fanshawe was always there’.⁸⁴ Fanshawe is the quest object within ‘The Locked Room’, the ‘missing person’ for whom the detective is searching, although Fanshawe is significant throughout the *Trilogy* because ‘These three stories are finally the same story’.⁸⁵ The narrator of ‘The Locked Room’ dramatises the conflict between prey (Fanshawe) and predator (Quinn) in the two previous stories within the *Trilogy*: in ‘City of Glass’, Fanshawe is the mysterious Peter Stillman (senior) and in ‘Ghosts’, he is the character of Black/White.

The division between Fanshawe and Quinn is significant because Fanshawe, despite being the alleged prey, is in complete control of Quinn’s actions. He is an author who ‘authorises’ Quinn’s descent, thereby inverting the traditional conventions of the detective story – the fascistic ‘controlling artist’ of the *Trilogy*.⁸⁶ The fact that both appear throughout the *Trilogy* in this way suggests that both function as ‘ghosts’, haunting the edges of Auster’s

⁸³ Paul Auster, *Moon Palace* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 31; Paul Auster, *Mr Vertigo* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 276; Paul Auster, *In the Country of Last Things* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 31.

⁸⁴ Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 197.

⁸⁵ Auster, *The New York Trilogy*, p. 294.

⁸⁶ Barth, p. 21.

novel. However, whereas Fanshawe is the power behind-the-scenes, the manipulative ghost of the literary text (ideology, language, or authorial intention), Quinn signifies a blank space, the true ghost in the sense that he impotently *haunts* Auster's texts. This creates a hierarchy within the *Trilogy* where 'Paul Auster' is the 'author' relegated to 'character', Fanshawe is the 'character' elevated the 'author', and 'Quinn' is left as a doubled character, the product both of Auster and Fanshawe, having no existence or experience past that which is chosen for him. Fanshawe exists in the authorial space 'above' the text; Quinn, in comparison, is 'below' the text, always written upon, dictated to, in effect, 'authored' – the absent presence (or present absence) of nihilism.

This textual space of absence (or the absence of textual space) suggested by Quinn can be contrasted with Steven Alford's reading of the *Trilogy*. Alford argues that the utopia – as 'no-place' – within the *Trilogy* is implicitly connected with the reconstruction of meaning and revolves around the fact that the utopian space imagined by Stillman Sr is founded upon an anthropocentric universe:

Its existence is immanent within man himself: the idea of a beyond he might someday create in the here and now. For utopia was nowhere – even, as Dark explained, in its 'wordhood.' And if man could bring forth this dreamed-of place, it would only be by building it with his own two hands.⁸⁷

Stillman Sr feels that it is only through man's efforts that meaning can be created, reminiscent of Blocker's arguments on projective *versus* non-projective meaning. For Alford, the spaces of walkers and mappers (Quinn fits both categories) present within the *Trilogy*

⁸⁷ Auster, *The New York Trilogy*, pp. 46-47.

‘exists in a “nowhere” out of which meaning emerges’.⁸⁸ This is later qualified as, ‘The utopia of *The New York Trilogy* is not a not-here but a neither-here-nor-there. It is an arena of mediation out of which the possibility for the spaces of home-away, self-other, inside-outside, and pedestrian space-mapped space emerges’.⁸⁹ Furthermore, this non-space ‘is not a physical space, but a space of textuality’.⁹⁰ This argues that meaning is constructed as a result of this non-place, which, as Alford’s final point makes, borrowing from the terminology of Heidegger and Derrida, ‘is a neither-here-nor-there’.⁹¹ This ‘neither-here-nor-there’, or textual ‘nowhere-ness’, of utopia links nihilism and the sublime. ‘Nowhere’ indicates both ‘no-where’, the purely heterotopian space of nihilism, and ‘now-here’, the sublime moment identified by Newman and Lyotard.

Quinn stubbornly resists interpretation, despite Alford’s best efforts, because of his association with the ‘not’. This emerges when things ‘literally’ begin to fall apart: ‘Quinn’s mind dispersed. He arrived in a neverland of fragments, a place for wordless things and thingless words’.⁹² This ‘neverland’ is also the title of Fanshawe’s novel within ‘The Locked Room’, a novel about which the reader/narrator states ‘I lost my way after the first word’.⁹³ As such, then, the first word of the *Trilogy* is the point at which readers begin to lose their way – ‘It’ – ‘It was a wrong number that started it’.⁹⁴ What was a wrong number that started what? This question is never answered by the text: ‘it’ is dependent upon the ‘Fanshawe’ mode of reading – the hermeneutic methodology embedded within an ideology. The Quinn

⁸⁸ Steven E. Alford, ‘Spaced-Out: Signification and Space in Paul Auster’s *The New York Trilogy*’, *Contemporary Literature*, 36:4 (1995), 613-32 (p. 626).

⁸⁹ Alford, p. 629.

⁹⁰ Alford, p. 625.

⁹¹ Alford, p. 631.

⁹² Auster, *The New York Trilogy*, p. 72. This also evokes Beckett’s ‘there would be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names’. See Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, collected in *Molloy/Malone Dies/The Unnameable* (London: Calder, 1994), p. 31.

⁹³ Auster, *The New York Trilogy*, p. 314.

⁹⁴ Auster, *The New York Trilogy*, p. 1.

mode of reading, the dispersal of his mind, reflects Slothrop's response to conditioning in *Gravity's Rainbow*; a personal dissolution that reflects narrative dissolution. This novel of un-signified signifiers ('thingless words') and signified unsignifiers ('wordless things') is a direct allegory for postmodern literature as a whole. The narrator describes it thus:

If I say nothing about what I found there, it is because I understood very little. All the words were familiar to me, and yet they seemed to have been put together strangely, as though their final purpose was to cancel each other out. I can think of no other way to express it. Each sentence erased the sentence before it, each paragraph made the next paragraph impossible. It is odd, then, that the feeling that survives from this notebook is one of great lucidity.⁹⁵

The reader can say 'nothing' of what they found within the text and all the words, whilst familiar, 'have been put together strangely' (one might think of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry here). The text itself is blank, not in the sense of ethically 'blank', as seen in 'blank fiction', but in the sense that it is written by the reader. We become, as Danielewski notes in *House of Leaves*, 'lost in the twist of so many dangerous sentences'.⁹⁶ Their 'final purpose' – a teleological *interpretation* – is 'to cancel each other out' – an anti-teleological *intention*. Thus, within the postmodern, its natural teleology is to cancel out teleology – the end is to remove the possibility of an ending through the means of reflexive paradox.

Each of the endings of the three stories in Auster's *Trilogy* defer narrative resolution, and instead offer an ellipsis of the narrative, as William Lavender notes: 'All the codes [...] decipher to ellipsis'.⁹⁷ This 'deciphering' of the narrative 'code' by the reader is significant because to 'decipher' is literally 'to bring back from the blank term'. John Barrow notes that

⁹⁵ Auster, *The New York Trilogy*, pp. 313-14.

⁹⁶ Danielewski, p. xviii.

⁹⁷ William Lavender, 'The Novel of Critical Engagement: Paul Auster's *City of Glass*', *Contemporary Literature*, 34:2 (1993), 219-39 (p. 236).

‘cipher’ is a term used to indicate absence – an unknown, such as x – that originally referred to ‘nothing’.⁹⁸ The act of ‘de-coding’ or ‘de-ciphering’ is therefore the act of ‘re-coding’ or ‘un-ciphering’: interpellating absence into a given hermeneutic or ideological framework. Lavender’s observation that all codes ‘decipher to ellipsis’ is therefore interpreting absence *as* ellipsis. By interpreting absence as such, Lavender encourages readers to remain ethical towards the text, to refuse to propose meaning on what is meaningless. This perception of the ‘negative’ hermeneutic moment of postmodern literature is ‘neverland’ – the space of nihilism. It is also, to turn back to any earlier representation of this (both chronologically and within this thesis), the space that Edmund desires in *A Long Day’s Journey into Night*: ‘a world where the truth is untrue and life can hide from itself’.⁹⁹ Thus, *Neverland* stands as a representative postmodern text (that is itself absented within another postmodern text), defining the space identified within this thesis: the space of postmodern nihilism.

⁹⁸ See John D. Barrow, *The Book Of Nothing* (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 49-50.

⁹⁹ Eugene O’Neill, *A Long Day’s Journey into Night* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990), IV (p. 113).

‘The Preface Again’

Their books are also different from our own. Their fiction has but a single plot, with every imaginable permutation. Their works of a philosophical nature invariably contain both thesis and antithesis, the rigorous *pro* and *contra* of every argument. A book that does not contain its counter-book is considered incomplete.

– Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Obis Tertius’.¹

This thesis has argued that nihilism and the sublime are the two vital components of postmodernism, and has defined the characteristics of a ‘postmodern’ nihilism. However, to conclude, it is important to note a number of problems with this hypothesis. As was seen in chapter four, reflexive sentential paradoxes are at the heart of postmodern nihilism and thus it is too simple to merely conclude that nihilism and the sublime exist as a duality within postmodernism. This conclusion – entitled ‘The Preface Again’ because that is a ‘strengthened version’ of the paradox of ‘The Preface’ – must therefore undo the argument presented. The paradoxical nature of the formulation of nihilism presented in this thesis requires, to be properly argued, the destruction of the very argument that enabled it: in order to conclude its hypothesis, this thesis must destroy it. The book expresses its counter-book, the thesis expresses its antithesis, although not for the sake of completion, but to indicate that nihilism itself is incomplete. It undoes itself by the very language of its construction and deconstructs itself.

This is seen clearly in relation to the main threads of this argument. The first thing of note is the historical construction of nihilism and the sublime within the first four chapters.

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Obis Tertius’, in *Collected Fictions*, trans. by Andrew Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), pp. 68-81 (p. 77).

As was observed, this is fundamentally a history of modernity, a *grand récit* in which nihilism and the sublime are constructed as the mainstays of modernity. To simplify ‘modernity’ to such an extent ignores the counter-movements that co-exist with both nihilism and the sublime during this period. Similarly, the perception of nihilism as a ‘temporally-displaced formulation of the sublime’ is reductive to the point of absurdity. The complexity of aesthetics within the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries means that any number of conclusions could be drawn from the formulations of the sublime, of which ‘nihilism’ is only one. When this is appended to the construction of postmodernism, it is equivalent to what mathematicians call an ‘error carried forward’ – the conclusions may be valid but the initial assumptions are incorrect. This means that both chapters on ‘sublime postmodernism’ and ‘postmodern nihilism’, and the literary chapters of this thesis, can be summarised by ‘[sic]’. Although peripheral arguments were made alongside this central thesis, most notably the connection between poststructuralism and nihilism, and postmodernism and nihilism, these threads do not support the idea that nihilism, the sublime, and postmodernism are fundamentally linked, but that some critics have observed similar arguments whereas others have not. This is therefore not a thesis so much as a collection of arguments, *pro* and *contra*, the hypothesis that nihilism, the sublime, and postmodernism are linked.

The production of a ‘postmodern nihilism’ is therefore *both* accurate *and* inaccurate. Its very transmission requires a proposition, a performative act that invalidates its own performance. This is what Derrida calls ‘the performative contradiction’: ‘The performative gesture of the enunciation would in the act prove the opposite of what the testimony claims to declare, namely, a certain truth’.² By declaring what nihilism is, this thesis has in fact

² Jacques Derrida, *The Monolingualism of the Other OR The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. by Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 3.

automatically invalidated that argument because nihilism cannot be what has been argued. Just as Barthelme and Little never truly represent the ‘nothing’, and Mark Taylor never truly represents the ‘not’, this thesis cannot represent nihilism without thereby representing it as something that it is not. As Alford notes in discussing the Auster’s *New York Trilogy*, ‘We must proceed to the next step of the argument fully conscious of the paradox involved: I am asserting the truth of an argument that assumes the unavailability of a truth-based certification’.³ By arguing the truth of nihilism, this thesis falls into the paradox of asserting a truth that cannot be asserted.

This is suggested by de Lauretis, although she refers to the works of Calvino and Beckett. She writes that Calvino exhibits ‘a massive deployment of signs of writing, rather than Beckett’s “itinerary toward silence”’.⁴ This is not ‘the impossibility of expression, the absence, the traces, the shredding and dissolution of language into silence, but instead the massive presence, the concrete materiality, the pressure, the multiplication of words and meanings’. This supports the formulation of nihilism as both post-apocalyptic destruction and the absence before Being. However, de Lauretis sees another possibility in this, where this is ‘the “implosion” prophesized by Baudrillard, the mad rush of both modernism and postmodernism together into the black hole’.⁵ This nihilistic implosion, where modernist nihilism and postmodern nihilism are themselves undone, is a black hole where the concept of nihilism is itself devalued.

Anne Stevenson’s poem ‘Black Hole’ (1993) is a useful allegory for this. Although the poem is ‘about’ depression, the terminology suggests the very ambivalence that is contained

³ Steven E. Alford, ‘Mirrors of Madness: Paul Auster’s *The New York Trilogy*’, *Critique*, 37:1 (1995), 17-33 (p. 22).

⁴ Teresa de Lauretis, ‘Reading the (Post)Modern Text: *If on a winter’s night a traveler*’, in *Calvino Revisited*, ed. by Franco Ricci (Ottawa: Dovehouse, 1989), pp. 131-45 (p. 143).

⁵ de Lauretis, p. 143.

within this thesis' conception of nihilism (perhaps the 'earth' of the argument falling into 'the happy depression of its birth', as Baudrillard would say).⁶ 'Black Hole' begins:

I have grown small
 inside my house of words,
 empty and hard;
 pebble rattling in a shell.⁷

This thesis, as a 'house of words' or 'house of leaves', contains within it a seed of nihilism that has 'grown small', 'empty and hard'. It is the nihilism that exists prior to the conception of the text, an absolutely interior nihilism that exists within the formulation of nihilism presented by this thesis. Later, Stevenson writes:

I can't help being the hole
 I've fallen into.
 Wish I could tell you
 how I feel.⁸

Nihilism can only exist as the hole in which it falls into, as paradoxical arguments that undo themselves in the very act of being conceived. As such, nihilism cannot communicate because it is an absence that is always already absent, an absence that cannot be revealed or unveiled by the presence of words. The poem concludes:

⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. by Chris Turner (Bath: Verso, 1991), p. 71.

⁷ Anne Stevenson, 'Black Hole', in *Four and a Half Dancing Men* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 51.

⁸ Stevenson, p. 51.

Piles
of words, sure, to show
where I was. But nothing true
about me left, child.⁹

This thesis' construction of nihilism is 'piles of words', just as Barthelme's and Little's 'nothing', and Taylor's 'not', are 'piles of words', with 'nothing true' remaining. This is both in the sense of 'everything is false' and, paradoxically, 'nothingness is true': nihilism can only be true when it is both true and false, or neither true nor false, and thus nothing remains of nothing but Baudrillard's 'remainder of the remainder'.¹⁰ Although Boundas' construction of a 'deconstructed nihilism' is plausible, he writes that 'Nothing, in all this, prevents us from talking about *the* rhetoric of nihilism'.¹¹ In all these 'piles of words', however, nothingness is exactly that which 'prevents us from talking about *the* rhetoric of nihilism' because of the ethical demand to allow the Other to remain Other. The only way of talking about it is to use language and strategies that turn in on themselves, such as Auster's 'neverland of fragments', or to just scrap the entire idea, as Barthelme writes: 'Who's got a match?'.¹²

How should this conclusion conclude then? It would be possible to end this thesis with the phrase that despite all these facts 'this thesis can be summarised as an exploration of nihilism in relation to postmodern theory and literature', thereby indicating a cyclical return to the beginning of the thesis, although this would indicate a form of eternal recurrence suggesting an internal logic to the construction of nihilism. Similarly, it could end on an

⁹ Stevenson, p. 51.

¹⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 143.

¹¹ Constantin V. Boundas, 'Minoritarian Deconstruction of the Rhetoric of Nihilism', in *Nietzsche and the Rhetoric of Nihilism: Essays on Interpretation, Language and Politics*, ed. by Tom Darby, Béla Egyed, and Ben Jones (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1989), pp. 81-92 (p. 82).

¹² Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 72; Donald Barthelme, 'Nothing: A Preliminary Account', in *Sixty Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1993), pp. 245-48 (p. 247).

ellipse, the symbol that has been used throughout to indicate what a postmodern nihilism may mean: $\frac{\dots}{\dots}$. This would also be incorrect because the very act of representing nihilism would incorporate it into the 'orders of the image'. In fact, any number of tropes could be suggested on which to end this thesis, from quotations about being trapped in labyrinths to the simple conclusion that this thesis cannot strictly end without being only a 'preliminary' account of what postmodern nihilism is. The solution is found in the presentation of an 'ethical' nihilism within this thesis because ethical language, as Robbins argues, 'must not merely constate or describe the ethical, it must perform it'.¹³ This gives us the only possible *ethical* strategy on which to conclude this thesis because to be ethical towards nihilism is to let nihilism to speak for itself:

¹³ Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), p. 11.

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