

A HISTORY OF NIHILISM IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Nihilism – the belief that life is meaningless – is frequently associated with twentieth-century movements such as existentialism, postmodernism and Dadaism, and thought to result from the shocking experiences of the two World Wars and the Holocaust. In his rich and expansive new book, Jon Stewart shows that nihilism’s beginnings in fact go back much further to the first half of the nineteenth century. He argues that the true origin of modern nihilism was the rapid development of Enlightenment science, which established a secular worldview. This radically diminished the importance of human beings so that, in the vastness of space and time, individuals now seemed completely insignificant within the universe. The author’s panoramic exploration of how nihilism developed – not only in philosophy, but also in religion, poetry and literature – shows what an urgent topic it was for thinkers of all kinds, and how it has continued powerfully to shape intellectual debates ever since.

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THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Confrontations with Nothingness

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If ignorance of nature gave birth to gods, a knowledge of nature is calculated to destroy them.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Queen Mab*¹

¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Queen Mab*, London: R. Carlile 1822, “Notes. VII. Page 61. There is no God!,” p. 132. Quoted from Paul Henri Thiry d’Holbach, “Chapitre Premier. Origine de nos idées sur la Divinité,” in his *Système de la Nature, ou des Loix du Monde Physique et du Monde Morale*, new ed., vols. 1–2, London: n.p. 1781, vol. 2, p. 22.

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| <i>List of Figures</i> | page viii |
| <i>Preface</i> | ix |
| <i>Acknowledgments</i> | xi |
| Introduction | 1 |
| 1 Jean Paul's Vision of Nihilism and Plea for the Doctrine of Immortality | 35 |
| 2 Klingemann and the Absurdity of Nothingness in <i>The Nightwatches</i> | 64 |
| 3 Nihilism in English Romanticism: Byron and Shelley | 99 |
| 4 Schopenhauer's Theory of Human Suffering and Lack of Meaning | 126 |
| 5 Büchner's Account of the Reign of Terror as a Mirror of Human Existence | 149 |
| 6 Poul Martin Møller's Criticism of Hegelianism and the Danish Discussion of Nihilism | 173 |
| 7 Kierkegaard and the Indefinability and Inexplicability of Death | 201 |
| 8 Turgenev's Portrait of a Nihilist | 237 |
| 9 Nietzsche's Vision of the Past and the Future of Nihilism | 259 |
| 10 The Importance of Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century | 280 |
| <i>Selected Bibliography on Nihilism</i> | 308 |
| <i>Name Index</i> | 311 |
| <i>Subject Index</i> | 316 |

FIGURES

- | | | |
|-----|---|---------|
| 0.1 | The cover of Johann Andreas Segner's <i>Einleitung in die Natur-Lehre</i> , 3rd edition. Göttingen: Abram Vandenhoecks seel. Wittwe (1770) | page 29 |
| 1.1 | Joshua Reynolds, <i>David Garrick between Tragedy and Comedy</i> (1761) | 46 |
| 2.1 | Detail from Michelangelo, <i>The Last Judgment</i> (1541) | 69 |
| 2.2 | William Hogarth's etching, <i>The Tailpiece, or the Bathos</i> (1764) | 88 |
| 3.1 | Colossal bust of Rameses II, the "Younger Memnon" (1250 BC) | 122 |
| 7.1 | [Niels Prah], <i>Det menneskelige Livs Flugt, eller Døde-Dands, hvorudi ved tydelige Forestillinger og Underviisnings-Vers viises, hvorledes at Døden uden Persons Anseelse, dandser af med Enhver, endog ofte uformodentlig, fra Verden til Evigheden; Afbildet ved lærerige Stykker, og Samtaler imellem Døden og Personerne, Forlagt og besørget til sine Landsmænds Nytte og Fornøjelse af Thomas Larsen Borup</i> (1762) | 229 |

PREFACE

This book is the culmination of a lifelong reflection on the problem of nihilism. I became interested in this issue at an early stage in my academic education and continued to return to it frequently over the subsequent years. In a sense this is a book that I have long wanted to write, and so it is with a great sense of gratification that I see it now appear. When I began work on it, I proudly imagined that I knew a fair bit about nihilism. But in the course of the work, I learned a great deal that was new to me. This project afforded me the opportunity to discover some new authors and revisit some old ones with whom I was already familiar. The research on this book has vastly expanded my knowledge of and appreciation for the problem.

Some authors such as Dostoevsky and Nietzsche have long been associated with nihilism, and their portrayals and analyses of the issue have been repeated so often that they have almost become a cliché. Since these connections have already been treated so thoroughly, I have tried to direct my focus to lesser-known figures who also played an important role in the development of the concept of nihilism. I have dutifully given some attention to the well-known figures associated with nihilism, but I have not made them my primary focus or treated them in a systematic, let alone exhaustive, manner.

I believe that the work adds something original to the research literature, providing a new explanation of the origin of nihilism in the modern context. It should therefore be of interest to scholars in philosophy, religious studies, German literature, Scandinavian Studies, and English Romanticism. Moreover, the book has been written so that it is accessible to students and generally interested readers. The reason for this is that I believe that everyone has feelings of anxiety, despair, hopelessness, and dark thoughts about death. There are times when all of us struggle to find meaning in life. Thus, nihilism is a topic that concerns everyone and is part of the human condition. It should therefore not be regarded as a purely academic issue. Because of this I have tried to frame this study not solely as an academic work designed for research specialists. I have refrained from engaging in lengthy polemics with other authors who have written on this theme. In the note apparatus, I have directed interested readers to the relevant works in the secondary literature for further reading. But I have avoided making these works explicit dialogue partners for my study.

All biblical quotations used in the present work are taken from the well-known translation, the New Revised Standard Version. The quotations from Shakespeare refer to the new scholarly edition *The New Oxford Shakespeare*.¹ Since the present investigation is a study in the history of ideas and concepts, it is important to understand the individual works under examination in their historical context. For this reason, I have tried to use the original editions of these works and not later reprints. However, in a few cases I have availed myself of later editions, but only when there was some compelling philological reason to do so. In line with my desire to make this study as accessible as possible to a broad readership, I have also provided references to standard English translations for the works treated here.

¹ *The New Oxford Shakespeare. The Complete Works*, modern critical ed., general eds., Gary Taylor, John Jowett, Terri Bourus, and Gabriel Egan, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016.

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My work on this project builds on a lecture that I gave entitled “The Problem of Nihilism in the Danish Golden Age,” which was presented at the annual conference of the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Studies in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on May 12, 2017. The lecture at the conference took place in the context of a stream, “The Crisis of the Danish Golden Age and Its Modern Resonance,” that I organized together with my friend Nate Kramer, to whom I remain eternally grateful.

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