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English Modernism and European Nihilism: Conrad, Lewis, Ludovici

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Comparative Literature

by

Anders Johnson

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Jane O. Newman, Co-Chair
Professor Kai Evers, Co-Chair
Professor John H. Smith
Professor Herschel Farbman

2023

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

English Modernism and European Nihilism: Conrad, Lewis, Ludovici

by

Anders Johnson

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Irvine, 2023

Professor Jane O. Newman, Co-Chair

Professor Kai Evers, Co-Chair

This dissertation considers the interaction between English modernism and the problematic of nihilism, focusing on select works by Joseph Conrad, Wyndham Lewis, and Anthony Ludovici. While it might be supposed that nihilism is a concept belonging to German or Russian intellectual histories, or that nihilism is strictly a philosophical problem, this dissertation shows how these three writers deployed distinct conceptions of nihilism in their work. It highlights that the problematic of nihilism was, therefore, both transnational in scope and explored in various genres of writing, arguing in turn for the formative role that nihilism played in English modernist production. At the same time, this dissertation emphasizes nihilism's unsettled character, arguing that each author's concept of nihilism is distinct in type, origin, and scale, gesturing in the process towards the different implications of these distinct conceptual deployments. In tracing these distinct deployments of the concept, this dissertation problematizes various critical accounts concerned with modernism and nihilism, offering new readings of how nihilism is conceptualized and represented in each author's work, as well as a new framework for distinguishing between nihilisms.

INTRODUCTION

Nihilism. It is *ambiguous.*
A. Nihilism is a sign of increased power of the spirit: as *active* nihilism.
B. Nihilism as decline and recession of the power of the spirit: as *passive* nihilism

-Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*

By calling the "inhumanity" of to-day or of the "October Revolution," a *super-*nihilism you do not change or intensify its character: but you do describe its latter-day scale—for it has now become universally effective and multiplied its power many times.

-Wyndham Lewis, "New Nihilism"

In various critical accounts of modernism, it has been claimed that the problematic of nihilism was a significant site of intellectual reflection for European modernist writers and thinkers: In *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature* (1976), Bradbury and McFarlane characterize modernism as "an extraordinary compound of the futuristic and the nihilistic," stating that it responds at once to "capitalism and constant industrial acceleration" and an "existential exposure to meaninglessness and absurdity" (27); in *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* (1991), Pippin argues that Nietzsche's attempt to grapple with "European nihilism" has good claim to be considered the *locus classicus* for a whole constellation of modernist themes including negativity, dissatisfaction, and despair (144); in *Modernism and Fascism* (2007), Griffin suggests that modernism's thematic admixture of decadence and renewal was rooted in the basic perception that Western society was "sliding towards the abyss of nihilism" (107); and in his essay on nihilism, *Über die Linie* (1950), Ernst Jünger claimed that "the great theme" in the literature of the last 100 years—referring to authors whom we now might characterize as modernists such as Trakl, Rilke, Lautreamont, Nietzsche, Rimbaud, Lawrence, Benn, Montherlant and Conrad—is nihilism (81-82). For Jünger, what distinguished these authors from each other is largely the extent to which they oscillate between resignation and action, between passive and active nihilisms. Yeats's poetic universe, striated with apocalyptic leitmotifs (Griffin

107), T.S. Eliot's characterization of his time as an "immense panorama of futility and anarchy" (483), Lewis's diabolical principle, the total moral anomie of La Rochelle's "Young European" and Elliot Paul's attendant question of "new nihilism,"[1] Mann's *Doktor Faustus*, composed for an era of "decline and destruction" (Eysteinsson 31)—these works and many others involve such a movement between resignation and action in the face of perceived cultural crisis, historical decline, looming civilizational destruction, or even a sense of cosmic meaninglessness.

However, despite the significance of nihilism for modernist discourse, the meaning of nihilism throughout these engagements remained ambiguous. Rapid industrial development and technological advancement, urbanization, secularization, mass forms of social life, and two global wars all contributed toward the modernist sense that "the solidity and visibility of reality itself had evaporated" (Bradbury & McFarlane 57). In this climate of disruption and change, nihilism was likewise multifaceted in character, with questions of nihilism's type, origin, intensity, and trajectory being continually renegotiated through modernist debates and disagreements and through various genres of writing. Thus, while nihilism may be an important *topos* of modernist discourse, a comparative examination of these discussions suggests at the same time a degree of conceptual indeterminacy, giving way to a variety of formulations: Does nihilism refer to the loss, dissipation, or displacement of some kind of historical *telos*? Or, conversely, does it entail an overinvestment in human agency and a capacity to actively shape the future over and against the vicissitudes of nature or some principle of destiny? Should questions of historical aimlessness or decline be thought at the scale of human history, European history, or even particular national histories? Or should nihilism be conceptualized as cosmic in scale, referring to an aimlessness that exceeds and circumscribes human history altogether and which

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[1] See Chapter 2

signals an ultimate outer limit to human systems of meaning? Epistemologically speaking, does nihilism refer to the limits of human knowledge, humanity's expulsion from the truth, or a rejection of truth altogether? Or does it involve an epiphanic exposure to a truth which is too terrible to bear and that is typically covered over by the everydayness of human discourse? And at an even narrower scale of individual experience, is nihilism to be equated with an overinvestment in action and the reality of interior experience in the absence of higher orienting values? Or does nihilism refer to a condition of passivity, a quieting of the will, a denial of the will to live, an overall sense of resignation in the face of existence? This array of questions points to just a few of the ways in which the concept of nihilism was discussed, debated, and thematized in modernist discourse. When considered in a comparative manner, nihilism can be approached by way of a problematic then, that is, as a framework or set of questions, rather than as a single determinate concept.

Rather than delimiting nihilism's significance and provenance to German or Russian intellectual history, this dissertation raises the question of twentieth-century nihilism within the context of English modernism, a context where this concept has typically had little purchase, arguing instead for the formative role that the transnational problematic of nihilism played in English modernist production. In this dissertation, I bring the problematic of nihilism to bear on the works of three English modernist writers who engaged with some of the above questions at various moments in their careers, but whose works have not been sufficiently thought in this context. Specifically, Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957), and Anthony Ludovici (1882-1971) are three writers associated with the literary-historical concept of English modernism who grappled both implicitly and explicitly with the problematic of nihilism in many of their essays, fictional works, and personal correspondence. Taking the above set of questions

into consideration, this dissertation reframes specific texts by these authors as twentieth-century responses to a perceived sense of metaphysical crisis, cultural decline, and political and aesthetic decadence, tracing the conceptual variability of nihilism as its meaning came to be renegotiated through these authors' writings. In doing so, I show that Conrad, Lewis, and Ludovici correspond to three different types of engagement with nihilism, with each author assigning different origins and trajectories to nihilism, thinking nihilism according to different scales of intensity, oscillating between active and passive varieties of nihilism, and using nihilism to warrant different political ideas. In turn, through the distillation and constellation of each deployment, I show how even at the level of English modernism, nihilism's ambiguity remained.

In unfolding the distinct types of nihilism represented by Conrad, Lewis, and Ludovici, this dissertation expands upon and complicates three types of criticism. Firstly, (*i.*) philosophers like Karen Carr and Donald A. Crosby have attempted to articulate different taxonomies of nihilism to lend some clarity to nihilism's ambiguity. These authors have attempted to develop frameworks for differentiating between types of nihilism and for a variety of philosophical problems which to them fall under the ambit of "nihilism." I apply certain aspects of their typologies to texts by Conrad, Lewis, and Ludovici as a way of differentiating between these three writers' deployments of the concept. At the same time, I place emphasis on historical and scalar differences between the three writers' concept of nihilism, complicating the categories of distinction articulated in Carr's and Crosby's typologies. Secondly, (*ii.*) I expand on the work of critics who have thematized the relation between modernism and nihilism, such as Shane Weller and Stuart Smith, who directly build upon Carr's and Crosby's typologies in their analysis of certain modernist writers. My chapters on Conrad, Lewis, and Ludovici offer new material for this framework of interpretation while complicating their overall characterization of the relation

between modernism and nihilism.[2] Thirdly (*iii.*), in my chapters on Conrad and Lewis, I engage with various critical readings which analyze these authors in relation to nihilism while suggesting new ways of characterizing these authors' engagement with the problematic of nihilism. In the case of Ludovici, there is a considerable lack of critical attention as it pertains to the question of nihilism, but I argue that his work warrants attention insofar as it corresponds to a third type of nihilism which can be contrasted against Conrad's and Lewis's, and which is important for understanding the different ways in which nihilism was conceptualized in modernist debates and discussions.

(*i.*) Donald A. Crosby's *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism* (1988) is an example of the typological approach to defining nihilism. In his text, Crosby enumerates several distinct categories of nihilism which my dissertation's analysis draws upon. Crosby's aim is to "take the term's ambiguity into account" by "sorting out" the term's meaning into five types. The types distilled by Crosby are characterized as follows: *political nihilism*, referring to forms of political revolution and terrorism in which "negation or destruction for its own sake seemed to be the dominant aim" (10); *moral nihilism*, the denial of general morality expressed either as amoralism, moral subjectivism, or egoism (11); *epistemological nihilism*, the denial of knowledge expressed either as the relativism of the truth or as semantic intelligibility (18); *cosmic nihilism,* the assertion of the meaninglessness of the cosmos or the idea that the cosmos "provide no sanction for the ideals and goals" of human beings (27); and *existential nihilism,* the judgement that human existence is pointless or absurd,

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[2] Like nihilism, the concept of modernism is of course unsettled in its own way, rife with contradictions and tensions. While some of these tensions come into view in this dissertation, the overall focus remains on the ambiguities of nihilism. For a study which deals more specifically with charting the conflicting paradigms of modernism, see Astradur Eysteinsson's book, *The Concept of Modernism* (1992).

the "abandonment of all goals," and the "cultivation of a spirit of detached resignation" (30). Crosby's analysis begins with political nihilism, claiming that this was the main sense of the term when it came into usage in the West, coming into prominent usage by way of Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons* (1862) in which the figure of the political nihilist is characterized as "'a man who does not bow down before any authority, who does not take any principle on faith, whatever reverence that principle may be enshrined in'" and for whom "'the ground wants clearing first'" (qtd. in Crosby 10). Crosby's taxonomy also asserts a qualitative difference between this first political sense of nihilism vis-à-vis the other types that he describes, claiming that political nihilism is contingent in character whereas the other types of nihilism are universal in character. For instance, the difference between political nihilism and moral nihilism, according to Crosby, is that the former "makes claims about current political or historical facts and tendencies, while moral nihilism is a more strictly philosophical position, focusing on what is taken to be the human condition as such" (17). In other words, political nihilism involves the destruction of traditions of a "given place and era" whereas to be a moral nihilist is "to write off morality altogether" (17). In this way, Crosby silos off the historically contingent aspect of political nihilism along with its literary mediation, while suggesting that all other types of nihilism are concerned only with claims concerning universals (17).

Crosby's distinction between contingent and universal forms of nihilism is necessary to consider in outlining a typology of nihilism and it is something which informs my own readings of Conrad, Lewis, and Ludovici, although there are limits to his framing of this distinction as well. Whereas Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (1819) universalizes suffering as a cosmic condition to which humans are subjected (cosmic nihilism), and Giacomo Leopardi's "The History of the Human Race" (1824) claims that the hatred of existence is an

essential characteristic of the human species for whom there is always an inherent deficiency of meaning and wonder (existential nihilism) (4), Levi Strauss's 1941 lecture, "German Nihilism," instead argues that a specifically German form of nihilism should be characterized by "the desire for the destruction of something specific of modern civilization" (political nihilism), thinking nihilism at a scale significantly more limited than cosmic suffering or the human condition. In these cases, Crosby's claim that the contingent aspect of nihilism only maps onto political nihilism holds true. However, at the same time, certain deployments of the concept of nihilism reveal some slippage in the universal/contingent distinction as it is framed by Crosby. For instance, there are aspects of Nietzschean perspectivism, which Crosby characterizes both in terms of moral and epistemological nihilism because of the belief that there is no "transperspectival" criteria of truth, which at the same time are dependent on a particular historical trajectory (Crosby 19). Most famously, Nietzsche's analysis of the history of moral nihilism in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) describes a transition between two different paradigms of valuation, from aristocratic valuation, which he associates with the Romans and which is characterized by physical strength, the superabundance of power, a pathos of distance and the ability to create value for one's own benefit (15), to priestly valuation, which he associates with Judeo-Christianity and which is characterized by weakness, resentment and a "no" to life, with this transition preparing the ground for the "ascetic ideal" that Nietzsche took to be synonymous with a Schopenhauerian position (144). In this case, Nietzsche recasts Schopenhauer's cosmic nihilism as being rooted in a specific historical trajectory, suggesting Schopenhauer's cosmic nihilism is instead symptomatic of a historically contingent morphology of the will.

Crosby's claim that contingency only maps onto the political type of nihilism is further challenged by attending to the specific writers analyzed in this dissertation and their deployment of the concept of nihilism. As I discuss in Chapter 1, for instance, although Conrad does ultimately gesture towards a form of cosmic nihilism, his skepticism of action and knowledge, which can be construed as moral and epistemological types of nihilism, are also situated historically in relation to civilizational development, allegorized as a knitting machine through which these types of nihilism are intensified. Further, Lewis's notion of nihilism as it is analyzed in Chapter 2 involves the romanticization of action and a pathos of revolution for revolution's sake, with Lewis characterizing this at various points as moral nihilism or existential nihilism, rather than just political nihilism. For Lewis, this nihilism is partially rooted in "the other side of an obsession about some wooden 'virtue'" that emerges from the German Protestant mind and its divergence from a Catholic tradition of thought, and thus it is historically contingent in nature (69). Lastly, while Ludovici makes a universal claim concerning the reduction of all moral values to the will to power, suggesting that all of human history can be interpreted as a struggle between master and slave moralities, Chapter 3 shows how he also maps the unfolding of this struggle onto historical events such as the English civil war, positing particular "turning points" wherein one framework of value becomes ascendent over another. Thus, like Nietzsche, he suggests that the emergence of certain valuative paradigms is contingent on a particular set of historical events which then foster a nihilistic morphology of the will. The range of conceptual determinations that I highlight in these author's work both illustrate the usefulness of Crosby's distinctions, then, while also demonstrating the limitations of casting all modes of nihilism aside from political nihilism as claims concerned only with ahistorical universals.

Karen Carr's *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth-Century Responses to Meaninglessness* (1992) is another example of the typological approach to defining nihilism which I draw from in my dissertation. Like Crosby, Carr's contention is that nihilism "has no universally agreed-upon definition," and thus her aim is to develop a classificatory framework whereby specific conceptual elements of nihilism can be distinguished from each other (9). Although the term is derived from the Latin *nihil,* meaning "not anything; nothing," Carr locates the modern usage of the term "nihilism" in nineteenth-century debates concerned with the implication of German Idealism (13). Carr names Friedrich Jacobi as one of the first philosophers to deploy the concept, using the term to signify "the loss or dissolution of an independently existing world external to consciousness" (14). For Carr, distinct deployments of the concept have subsequently added various "layers" to this notion, for instance by Russian political nihilists, and then by Nietzsche's various interpretations of the idea, and then by the twentieth-century reception of the concept, especially as it came to be mediated by Nietzsche's thought (14). The five types of nihilism Carr distills in her typology are as follows: (a) *epistemological nihilism*: the denial of the possibility of knowledge; (b) *alethiological nihilism*: the denial of the reality of truth; (c) *metaphysical or ontological nihilism*: the denial of the existence of an independently existing world; (d) *ethical or moral nihilism*: the denial of moral values; and (e) *existential or axiological nihilism*: the feeling of emptiness or pointlessness resulting from the belief that life has no meaning.

There are several noteworthy distinctions between Carr's and Crosby's taxonomies which I will highlight so as to further situate the methodological approach of this dissertation. First, in distinction from Crosby, Carr leaves out the political category of nihilism altogether. Although she briefly mentions Russian political nihilism as several points in her work, this type of nihilism

is not actually figured into her typology, and thus she elides the question of nihilism and its relation to history and political action. Second, Carr distinguishes between epistemological and alethiological nihilism whereas Crosby does not. This is because, as she explains, if one believes in a coherence theory of truth instead of a correspondence of theory of truth, it is possible to deny the possibility of knowledge of reality while still maintaining the possibility of truth, understood as a socially constructed system of beliefs which are internally consistent (18). Third and most notably, existential nihilism is, for Carr, "secondary" whereas, for Crosby, it is characterized as most basic. That is, in the case of Carr's first four types, nihilism is expressed as a denial of the existence of something, specifically, the denial of knowledge, truth, the world, or morality. However, Carr does not frame existential nihilism as a philosophical position of denial, but rather as a "feeling," and thus it is cast instead as a mood or type of pathos which follows from a prior judgement concerning one or more of the first four types of nihilism. For this reason, Carr characterizes existential nihilism as a secondary phenomenon, indicating that it belongs more to "literary discussions of nihilism," and suggesting that as a "mood" or frame of mind it is always contingent on a prior philosophical judgement (18). Notably then, whereas nihilism in its original political sense is contingent for Crosby, and so distinct from its later philosophical forms, Carr invokes a similar distinction between contingency and universals but reframes the distinction by suggesting that nihilism as a concept emerges out of philosophical discourse and it is concerned in the first case with issues of epistemological nihilism. Further, she then relegates the secondary effects of this type of judgment to existential nihilism, claiming that this latter type of nihilism, which takes the form of a mood or feeling, should be more closely associated with literature, while implying that philosophical discourse is the primary place in which an engagement with nihilism can occur.

While Carr's distinctions are certainly helpful in terms of distinguishing between types of nihilism, my readings of Conrad, Lewis, and Ludovici suggest that her typology also produces certain blind spots. In the first place, by implicitly casting philosophy as the space of logos (judgments concerning universal claims) and literature as a space of pathos (a mood which is temporary or secondary in character), Carr suggests that literature is conceptually secondary to philosophical discourse in its ability to engage with nihilism, insofar as literature only traces the affect of a prior philosophical judgment pertaining to the first four types of nihilism, manifesting itself as a subsequent feeling or mood (19). However, many of the texts examined in this dissertation complicate that characterization. For instance, Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress," a short story which I analyze in Chapter 1, is not limited to simply a pathos of meaninglessness in its exploration of imperialist exploitation. Rather, it directly engages with questions of the possibilities and limits of knowledge, truth, and of the relation of man to the world. Further, there are alternative types of texts which engage with the conceptual dimension of nihilism which are not explicitly philosophical in genre: The opaque and somewhat fragmented essays of Lewis, for instance, Conrad's reflections in his personal correspondence, and Ludovici's translator notes and art criticism are all notable for their explicit engagements with these questions of the limits of knowledge, truth, morality, and man's relation to the world.[3]

A further shortcoming of Carr's typology is that she does not distinguish between different "scales" of nihilism, a distinction which encompasses questions of nihilism's origin and trajectory as well as its intensity. Throughout this dissertation, I instead argue that this notion of scale is essential for distinguishing between various determinations of the concept. Whereas

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[3] While my focus here is on these three authors, it is worth noting that a characteristic feature of many modernist texts is the extent to which they blur the line between literary and philosophical discourse. Eliot, Woolf, Musil, and Svevo are all examples of writers who at times could confound the sort of delineation that Carr insists upon.

Crosby's typology includes at least one category which he characterizes as historical in character, suggesting a narrower scale of nihilism insofar as it reacts to a particular time and set of traditions over and against something like cosmic nihilism, Carr's rubric doesn't distinguish at all between historical scales of nihilism because all of her four primary types are cast as claims concerning universals. In contrast, I contend that each deployment of the concept of nihilism that is analyzed in this dissertation is predicated on a relation to different historical scales, even if these relations are presupposed. For instance, Anthony Ludovici speaks of nihilism as a condition of aimlessness particular in certain ways to the scale of English history, and thus it is more local and national in character; Lewis more broadly thematizes a "European" scale of nihilism, situating nihilism in relation to the Reformation and early modern thinkers such as Machiavelli; and Conrad considers nihilism at its largest scale, both at the scale of human civilization and in relation to a cosmological scale of time. Moreover, if epistemological, alethiological, metaphysical, and ethical nihilism correspond to judgements of denial, Carr doesn't distinguish between different intensities of denial, presumably because, like Crosby, these judgements are cast as entirely universal in character. However, as I highlight in my discussion of Conrad's critics in Chapter 1, the denial of knowledge might correspond to an epistemological impossibility, rooted in a basic disjunction between consciousness and world à la Jacobi's characterization of Idealism, or alternatively, it might refer to the existence of a truth which is epistemologically accessible to consciousness but which is psychologically difficult to bear. Both formulations signal a different scale of denial insofar as they impose different limits when it comes to man's access to knowledge or truth, and these different limits in turn imply different possibilities for thought and action. In my chapters, I thus highlight the distinct

historical scales of time and space as well as the different levels of intensity which characterize

each author's deployment of the concept of nihilism, showing how each author's engagement

with the problematic corresponds not just to different types of nihilism but also to distinct scalar

logics.

(*ii.*) Building upon Carr's and Crosby's typological approach, Shane Weller's *Modernism*

and Nihilism (2011) is more directly concerned with the intersection between nihilism and

aesthetic modernism (10-11). Weller frames his analysis by triangulating between three concepts:

modernity, modernism, and nihilism (9). While acknowledging the difficulty of defining

modernity, Weller loosely defines it as "that epoch in which the dominant values are those of the

eighteenth-century Enlightenment, with the core value being reason" (2). Weller effectively

situates the origin of modernity in eighteenth-century Europe and, citing Griffin, "the reflexive

mode of historical consciousness which legitimated the French revolutionaries' fundamental war

against tradition" (qtd. in Weller 3). In turn, Weller defines modernism as a countercurrent of

thought which emerges out of the sense of the failure of these Enlightenment values, emerging

especially in response to the failed revolutions of 1848 and the experience of the Franco-Prussian

war of 1870-71 (4). For Weller, the concept of nihilism lies "at the very heart of the modernist

critique of modernity," although he suggests at the same time that the concept has often been

deployed in a contradictory manner. As Weller puts it, aesthetic modernism "sees itself as the

counterforce to the nihilism of modernity, while on the other hand it is identified as the

embodiment of nihilism" (9). Continuing on, he writes that "with each major deployment of the

concept of nihilism in the modernist critique of modernity, its meaning shifts" (9). Thus,

emphasizing the "variable" nature of nihilism, Weller's approach is to examine the various

redeterminations of the concept of nihilism in relation to philosophical and aesthetic modernism (9).

Rather than strictly adhering to the Carr's and Crosby's typologies, Weller's methodology is to analyze various deployments of the concept "within the context of specific discourses," with Weller distinguishing between theological, political, philosophical, and aesthetic types of discourse. For Weller, the "origin" of nihilism as a concept is not in political nihilism, as Crosby suggests, nor is it in philosophical nihilism, as Carr suggests, but, rather, in theological discourse. As he points out, Jean-Baptiste-Louis Crevier (1693-1765) first used the term in reference to the heretical doctrines of a twelfth-century scholastic, Peter Lombard. As Crevier characterizes it, Lombard argued that "in as much as he is a man Jesus Christ is not something, or in other words, is nothing," with Crevier referring to this idea as the "heresy of the nihilists" (qtd. in Weller 19). However, during the French Revolution, the term became "anti-theologically political" when Anarcharsis Cloots (1755-1794) argued that the Republic must not be founded on theism, or on atheism, but on nihilism: "The republic of the rights of man is strictly speaking neither theist nor atheist, but nihilist" (qtd. in Weller 17). Weller's point in highlighting this is that the deployment of the concept of nihilism migrates from a specifically theological context to an anti-theological political context, and thus when analyzing the concept of nihilism one has to examine its specific discursive contexts in which it appears. From political nihilism, which goes on to include Russian revolutionary nihilism, the term is then deployed in philosophical discourse, first by Jacobi, and eventually by Nietzsche (80). Aesthetic discourse, for Weller, is the fourth type of discourse, with Weller arguing that the concept of nihilism migrates from these earlier deployments to aesthetic modernism, discussing in the process a wide range of artists and writers such as Flaubert, Kafka, Celan, and Wyndham Lewis. In this way, despite emphasizing the

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variable nature of nihilism, Weller inadvertently posits a rather linear trajectory of development as the concept moves from the theological, to the political, to the philosophical, to then terminate in aesthetic discourse (10).

In this dissertation, I build upon Weller's emphasis on the variable nature of nihilism by considering each author's engagement with nihilism as a distinct deployment of the concept, and I maintain Weller's overall point that these deployments can often be in tension with each other. On the one hand then, I seek to extend aspects of Weller's analysis to authors which he does not consider, like Conrad and Ludovici. While Weller briefly mentions T.S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, D.H. Lawrence, and Henry Miller in the context of Anglo modernism, I argue that Conrad and Ludovici are also significant in a study of the interaction between English modernism and nihilism insofar as they correspond to distinct deployments of the concept (107). While Weller does briefly discuss Lewis in his book, and he writes more extensively on Lewis and nihilism in another essay that I discuss in Chapter 2, I argue that he does not sufficiently characterize Lewis's deployment of the concept, as the linear nature of Weller's discursive trajectory leads him to ignore the theological context of Lewis's argument. More generally, if Weller is concerned with locating deployments of the concept in their discursive contexts, and claims that the origin of the term nihilism is "theological in its origins," it is curious that his analysis of this dimension doesn't extend in any significant way beyond the opening gambit of his first chapter, in the discussion of Peter's Lombard's heresy. Although Lewis and Ludovici both engage in aesthetic criticism, and invoke the concept of nihilism in that context, I show in Chapters 2 and 3 how their invocations of the concept are also prefigured in significant ways by their characterization of specific theological histories or questions. Further, as I show is the case of Lewis, Ludovici, and Ludovici's associate Oscar Levy (19), it is not always Christianity *as such*

that these authors associate with nihilism, but rather particular denominations, with the Reformation serving as a key turning point for these author's different deployments of the concept—a distinction which is entirely missing from Weller's analysis. Lastly, while Weller is right to raise the question of nihilism's relation to modernity, I show that, in the case of Lewis and Ludovici, their discussion of nihilism serves to negotiate their relation to an *early* modern past as well, not just a modernity narrowly defined as eighteenth-century Enlightenment or as commencing with the French Revolution. Instead, their characterizations of the concept reach back to the German Reformation, the English Civil War, to early modern thinkers like Machiavelli and Montaigne, and to what Lewis sees as the aesthetic nihilism of Shakespeare.

Building upon Weller's book, Stuart Smith's *Nietzsche and Modernism: Nihilism and Suffering in Lawrence, Kafka, and Beckett* (2018) focuses on the relation between nihilism and human agency, something which I thematize in my analysis as well. Unlike Weller, who offers a broad account of the various conceptual determinations of nihilism in philosophy and aesthetic modernism, Smith restricts his study to a description of nihilism as it is thought specifically by Nietzsche, and in turn to a study of the how Nietzschean nihilism informs the work of three modernist authors: Lawrence, Beckett, and Kafka. Smith writes that he holds the notion of nihilism as it is expressed by Nietzsche to denote "the incapacity to experience oneself as an agent of deeds, to be the overriding and consistent usage of the term in Nietzsche's discourse" (7). For this reason, he is interested in "modernist texts depicting wounded, powerless subjects," writing that Lawrence, Kafka, and Beckett each "dramatizes the frailty of the ill, the impotent, and the traumatized modern subject denuded of the traditional means to justify or redeem one's suffering" (14). In this way, Smith is concerned with nihilism as a psychological and physical condition in a much more limited sense than Crosby, Carr, or Weller, focusing on Nietzschean

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nihilism in its "passive" variety, specifically as the experience of a lack of agency and power, with the works that he chooses to analyze exhibiting in some way "a state of paralysis" or a situation that "precipitates or gestures towards suicide" (8).

The question of the relation between nihilism and agency which Smith raises in his study is likewise a central through line of my analysis, with each of the three authors I choose to examine exploring the limits of human agency through their deployment of the concept of nihilism. In my reading of Conrad's *An Outpost of Progress* in Chapter 1, I show how questions concerning the limits of human agency are a central theme of both his short story and his correspondence from that era, with Conrad oscillating between possibilities of paralysis and extermination as he explores the limits of human knowledge and communication, the overdetermining will of the civilizational knitting machine, and processes of cosmic entropy. Lewis is also concerned principally with the limits of human agency in his characterization of European nihilism, although for him nihilism corresponds more to an overinvestment in human agency and man's ability to shape historical outcomes. Instead, he prefers Montaigne's notion of passive contemplation, and a Shakespearean dynamic of tragic failure which discloses the limits of human power. Diverging from Smith's framework of analysis, Lewis's work is less overdetermined by Nietzschean conception of nihilism insofar as he aligns modern nihilism with a principle of action more so than passivity, and further, for him passive contemplation is not necessarily infused with the same pathos of suffering that Smith chooses to thematize. Ludovici's distillation of the concept of nihilism from Nietzsche likewise serves as an occasion to posit certain claims concerning the limits of human agency. For Ludovici, nihilism corresponds to a situation of aimlessness, a denial of life, and a passive relation to power, qualities which he argues are fostered by democracy and Christianity (170). As a counterforce to this passive

nihilism that is incapable of creative action, Ludovici posits an aristocratic framework of value which he thinks can be realized within environments of war and through nationalistic sacrifice.

Further, in each chapter, I allude to how these various interpretations of the limits of human agency involve distinct implications for each author's conception of historical development or political action. The limits of action and progress which Conrad thematizes serve to ironically undermine one of the legitimizing fictions of European imperialism, namely, that it is a source of historical progress. Lewis's critique of the actionist school of philosophy serves to warrant his anti-communist sentiments, insofar as he posits a continuity between revolutionary communism and an attitude of revolution for revolution's sake, taking the latter to be a basic quality of European nihilism. For Ludovici, the paralysis of the will that is induced through the aimlessness of the "thousand and one goals," a situation which is intensified through liberal democracy, warrants in turn his advocacy for a conservative and illiberal framework of value characterized by aristocratic conceptions of strength and power.

(*iii.*) In the first and second chapters of my dissertation, I also consider how specific critics of Conrad and Lewis have characterized these author's engagement with the problematic of nihilism in order to situate my own analysis. In my readings, I draw from the categories, typologies, and methodological concerns outlined above, complicating this critical literature through a consideration of generic differences, scalar differences, and by considering the passive or active modalities of nihilism that are discussed by each author.

In Chapter 1, I consider various characterizations of Conrad's skepticism by critics who in each case have linked his skepticism and his impressionistic textual strategy to nihilism, in turn offering my own characterization of Conrad's engagement with the problematic of nihilism. For Peters, Conrad's skepticism dramatizes the risk of slipping into a nihilistic solipsism and a

form of ethical nihilism; for Freedman, by contrast, Conrad's skepticism is framed as a pessimistic horror of the truth itself, and thus more existential rather than epistemological or ethical; and according to Miller, the limits of human knowledge and action thematized by Conrad are more historically contingent insofar as these limits are imposed through a developmental logic of human civilization. By highlighting the consonance between Conrad's thought and certain aspects of Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's thought, and then focusing on the limits of human knowledge, agency, and historical progress that are staged in Conrad's own work, my reading aims to complicate these three critical characterizations of Conrad's nihilism, particularly through a consideration of the scalar logic of Conrad's nihilism as it is presented in *An Outpost of Progress* and his correspondence from the same period. In my own reading, I show how the narrative frame of Conrad's text is used as a device for exploring the limits of human knowledge, how his imputation of a machinic will to civilization vis-à-vis the characters in his story raises questions concerning the limits of human agency, and how his thematization of entropic coldness in both his correspondence and his story are meant to suggest certain limits to conceptions of historical progress. As I show, this threefold engagement with the problematic of nihilism both complicates the readings of the above mentioned critics, who neglect to consider the manifold character of Conrad's concept of nihilism, while further showing how this engagement is specifically staged through literary discourse and some of the unique strategies that are available to it.

In Chapter 2, I distinguish between three types of critical interpretations of Lewis's nihilism in order to show, once more, what is lacking about these characterizations of the problematic. For McLuhan, Lewis's notion of nihilism is rooted in theological discourse and various tensions between Catholicism, Gnosticism, and Buddhism; for Weller, Lewis's notion of

nihilism is political, insofar as he argues that the nihilism corresponds to the negation of a principle of aesthetic autonomy and the politicization of aesthetics; and for Nath, Lewis's nihilism is purely aesthetic, rather than conceptual, in the sense that Lewis's references to nihilism are primarily literary and are intended to stylistically invoke a certain ambience. In this case, though a reading of Lewis's many critical essays from the late 1920's onwards, I try to disclose what is lacking in each of these characterization of Lewis's nihilism by focusing particularly on the question of agency and action which Lewis thematizes throughout his critical essays, the way in which he situates the emergence of nihilism in early modern discourse, and the scalar logic of his conception of nihilism which is distinct from Conrad's characterization of the concept insofar as it is more European and scale and confined to a narrower span of time.

Lastly, in Chapter 3, I turn my attention of Anthony Ludovici's deployment of the concept of nihilism, although my approach here differs as there is an overall lack of critical literature concerned with the topic of nihilism in his work. Instead, I perform a reading of Ludovici's notes and prefaces surrounding his translation of Nietzsche into English, from whom he distills a particular conception of nihilism and a certain set of qualities which he assigns to this concept, while comparing his interpretation of the Nietzschean concept of nihilism against Conrad and Lewis at various points in my reading. Then, I consider Ludovici's transposition of the concept of nihilism to certain debates within aesthetic modernism and to a specifically English scale of history. Once more, I consider how the scalar logic of Ludovici's conception of nihilism, which is distinct from Conrad's and Lewis's, represents a third type of engagement with the problematic of nihilism, with Ludovici presenting an alternative account of an early modern nihilism rooted in English parliamentarism and Puritanism. On the whole then, I argue that his work warrants attention insofar as he corresponds to a third type of nihilism which can be

contrasted against Conrad and Lewis, and which is important for understanding the different ways in which nihilism was conceptualized in England and in modernist debates and discussions.

While nihilism may be ambiguous, this dissertation aims to clarify the nature of some of these ambiguities through an analysis of Conrad's, Lewis's, and Ludovici's respective deployments of the concept. My focus on English modernism's engagement with nihilism is not intended to reify a specifically English form of nihilism. Instead, in all three cases I aim to show, first, the transnational significance of the concept as these authors engage with intellectual histories and debates beyond just an English context, and second, to show that there was a range of different interpretations and responses to the problematic within the context of English modernism itself. In the following analysis, I distinguish between different types of nihilism, in the manner of Carr and Crosby, as well as how nihilism can be situated within different kinds of discourses, in the manner of Weller, but I also posit my own framework of analysis which considers aspects of scale, intensity, genre, agency, contingency, and some of the implications of these different ways of casting nihilism. When a comparative approach is taken, I maintain, nihilism appears to be conceptually indeterminate. However, when thought as a problematic that has elicited distinct responses concerning the limits of man's relation to the world, to truth, to historical progress and to possibilities of action, then the formative nature of nihilism for the modernist texts considered in this dissertation can be seen.

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CHAPTER 1

A FROZEN DARKNESS: JOSEPH CONRAD'S CONCEPT OF NIHILISM AND ITS THREEFOLD STRUCTURE IN "AN OUTPOST OF PROGRESS"

1.1   Introduction

In the field of Conrad studies, the question of whether there is a nihilistic dimension to Conrad's work has generated a range of different responses. Many critics have been inclined to read Conrad's work as a form of proto-existential literature which responds to a nihilistic, pessimistic, or tragic perception of either human civilization or the cosmic order (Miller, Freedman). Others have sought to temper claims of nihilism to instead suggest that Conrad's impressionistic textual strategy, while informed by a kind of epistemological skepticism and belief in the inconclusiveness of subjective experience, never goes so far as to slip into full blow ethical anarchy or solipsism (Peters, Wollaeger). Further, critics have disagreed about the precise level at which Conrad's literary work is inflected by his pessimistic world-view: While some have read nihilism in Conrad's work at a narrative level (Mencken) or at a characterological level (Jünger), others have suggested that Conrad's nihilism plays out more through a formal aesthetic technique of perspectivism and inconclusive experiences (Said). However critics prefer to characterize Conrad's textual strategy, be it impressionistic, perspectival, or even phenomenological in nature, the significance of this exploration of inconclusive experience and ambiguity is itself rather ambiguous: while some construe it as a technique of critical irony, deployed to undermine the ideological presuppositions of European imperialism (Clausson),

others suggest it could itself be a nihilistic obfuscation through which Conrad aims to maintain contradictory values, failing to fully commit to a critique of imperialism (Brantlinger). Still others prefer to construe Conrad's textual strategy as a schizophrenic admixture of critical insight and ideology, with Conrad wavering between both a genuine critique of the imperialist will to power and an ideological reification of those processes insofar as he extrapolates them into cosmic principles of the all-consuming "knitting machine," from which there is no exit (Jameson).

There has thus been both significant discussion and significant ambiguity when it comes to the question of how best to characterize Conrad's nihilism. This chapter builds upon some of these discussions by raising the question of Conrad's nihilism in relation to his short story, "An Outpost of Progress," and his correspondence from the same period, aiming to clarify some of these ambiguities and to offer an alternative reading of the problem of nihilism in Conrad's work. To develop this analysis the chapter is divided into three parts: section 1.2 broadly describes the intellectual background within which Conrad was situated so as to foreground this reading of Conrad's nihilism, focusing especially on Conrad's connection to the thought of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche; section 1.3 focuses the analysis on three distinct interpretations of Conrad's nihilism as it relates to his skepticism, and the implications of this skepticism for notions of progress and the legitimacy of civilization, so as to develop a framework for interpreting Conrad's texts in section 1.4; After distilling these three critical framings of the problem, section 1.4 of this chapter then performs a close reading of Conrad's correspondence from the 1897-1898 period and his 1897 short story, "An Outpost of Progress."

Building on the intellectual background laid out in section 1.2 and the critical discussions covered in section 1.3, the reading performed in section 1.4 distills three aspects of Conrad's

nihilism, which I argue he characterizes in terms of three types of limitations and which are thought according to distinct scales: (*1.*) The limits of human knowledge, especially as it is mediated through language and memory, with negative implications for certain notions of enlightenment and progress following from these limits; (*2.*) The limits of human agency, namely the impotence of the individual will in relation to the overdetermining inhuman will of "the machine," thought at the scale of human civilization; (*3.*) The limits of civilizational development in relation to a principle of cosmic entropy, and the futility of believing in progress given these limits. In each case, the legitimacy of ideals of progress and civilization is brought into question, with this threefold questioning of human limits comprising the problematic which I term "Conradian nihilism."

1.2 Intellectual Background: Conrad's Philosophical Influences and Affinities as They Relate to the Concept of Nihilism

In "The Historical Background of European Nihilism," the German philosopher Karl Löwith argues that "Nihilism as the disavowal of existing civilization was the only real belief of all truly educated people at the beginning of the twentieth century" (Löwith, 10). For Löwith, by the end of the twentieth century there was a transnational tendency across philosophy and literature which could be best characterized by this emerging thematic of historical decline, typically expressed either in reaction to revolutionary events in Europe or to the rapidly intensifying forces of industrial modernization. For Löwith, a "feeling of aimlessness and spiritual pessimism" suffused European literature of the time, which had come to express "a type of nihilism formerly unknown" (7). Cited by Löwith, *Die Epigonen* (1830) by Karl Leberecht Immermann, Karl Gutzkow's *Die Nihilisten* (1856), and perhaps most famously Ivan Turganev's

Father and Sons (1860) were three early literary examples of works which either thematized the experience of a kind of moral nihilism, explored notions of civilizational progress through a more skeptical and even pessimistic register, or invoked the "figure" of the nihilist as a radical revolutionary committed to the destruction of civilization. Although he deemphasizes the extent to which this thematic was actually taken up, the historian Eric Hobsbawm similarly acknowledges the emergence of such a tendency beginning particularly in the 1880s, noting the emergence of a "small but flourishing genre of bourgeois writing on the decline and fall of modern civilization," with writers like Max Nordau and Friedrich Nietzsche cited as some of the most significant representatives of this "genre" (258). Notably, in the realm of British letters during this time and coinciding with the English reception of these texts by Turganev, Nordau, and Nietzsche, the "figure" of the nihilist began to be deployed in connection with these themes. For instance, Oscar Wilde's early play *Vera; or, the Nihilists* (1880) and his essay "The Decay of Lying" (1891) as well as Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima* (1885) all refer to the figure of the nihilist, characterized broadly as a disaffected revolutionary dedicated to no real specific political ends other than destruction as such.

In tracing the background of Joseph Conrad's own intellectual context, there is good reason to suggest an affinity between Conrad's thought and this intellectual context, characterized by its pessimistic pathos and the skepticism towards notions of historical progress, particularly the view that civilization might serve as a mechanism for that progress. That Conrad was engaged with this thematic at certain points in his life is suggested by Erdinast-Vulcan, who claims that Conrad's thought, especially from the late 1890's, should be situated in relation to the "intellectual unease of the *fin de siècle*" and the corresponding "cultural pessimism that generated the notion of the decline of the West" (92). Likewise, Paul Sheehan's *Modernism and*

the Aesthetics of Violence (2013) claims that the "chief assumption" of Conrad's work is that "civilization is predestined to perish" (156). As he puts it, Conrad's work "literalizes decadence, showing the grim consequences of decay in its various forms—physical, moral, historical" and it questions the "presumptions of moral superiority" of "(over)civilization" (155-156). Bradbury & McFarlane describe the modern world reflected in Conrad's literature as "nihilistic, nightmarish," with a "void at the center of values," a characterization which both emphasizes a nihilistic pathos in connection with Conrad's work and suggests a connection between Conrad's oeuvre and the themes of decadence, decline, and nihilism that were being explored more broadly within European literature of the time (616). According to Ian Watt, Conrad shared with the Victorians their "rejection of the religious, social and intellectual order of the past," and along with Eliot, Joyce, Lawrence, and Thomas Mann, also rejected "the religion of progress" (5). Lastly, in *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (2015), Vincent Sherry focuses on Conrad's later work *The Secret Agent* (1907), concerned with the revolutionary violence of the anarchists and nihilists of *fin de siècle* London, claiming this work must also be understood in connection to themes of historical decadence and decline. Here, Sherry argues for the close affinity between decadence and revolutionary nihilism insofar as "a sense of late, lost, and last days" presides over both, only in the latter case the response to this condition becomes manifest though the violent energies of revolutionary destructiveness (119).

In addition to these broad characterizations of Conrad's intellectual context, the relation between Conrad's work and these themes of nihilism and a skepticism of progress can be concretely linked to at least two key thinkers: (*i.*) Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) and (*ii.*) Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). Considered to be formative philosophical and literary influences on Conrad's work, there are significant connections, both direct and indirect, between

these thinkers and Conrad's work. Unraveling some of these more concrete connections will help to develop an intellectual background against which the question of Conrad's nihilism can begin to be raised.

(*i.*) *Schopenhauer:* An early influential critic who established the connection between Conrad and Schopenhauer was the English playwright and novelist John Galsworthy (1867-1933), a personal acquaintance of Conrad's. In his 1927 book *Castles in Spain*, Galsworthy relates how Conrad was a "voracious reader" fluent in Polish, French, and English, with his formative literary influences including Flaubert, Maupassant, Turgenev, and Henry James (119). As a reader of Turgenev and James especially, Conrad would have been exposed to literary depictions of the "figure" of the nihilist through these writers. But regarding Conrad's philosophical influences, Galsworthy claims that Conrad had read a great deal of philosophy and yet spoke very little of it. According to Galsworthy, the only major philosophical figure which Conrad discussed was that of Arthur Schopenhauer, the German philosopher of pessimism, who "used to give him satisfaction twenty years and more ago" (91), with Galsworthy here referring to Conrad's work from the turn of the century, the period belonging to some of his most nihilistic letters, *Heart of Darkness* (1899)*,* "An Outpost of Progress" (1897), and other generally pessimistic works.

Though only a passing reference, people interested in the philosophical background of Conrad's work have since made much of Galsworthy's connection between Conrad and Schopenhauer. In Knowles and Moore's *Oxford Reader's Companion to Conrad* (2000), a section dedicated specifically to Schopenhauer elaborates on the various interactions between Conrad's thought and Schopenhauer's. Characterized as a transitional figured between decadent *fin de siècle* and modernist writers, Knowles and Moore claim that Conrad belonged "to a

generation of writers in the 1890s who could hardly have avoided being exposed to the impact of the charismatic German philosopher whose 'voice' echoed throughout Europe" (365), with Conrad's exposure to Schopenhauer being both direct and indirect in nature. That is, while Conrad read Schopenhauer himself, he was also exposed to Schopenhauer's though as it was mediated through the work of other contemporaries, primarily Guy de Maupassant, who himself was strongly influenced by Schopenhauer (365). Along with Maupassant's work, William Wallace's biography "*The Life of Arthur Schopenhauer*" (1890), Ferdinand Bruntière's "La Philosophie de Schopenhauer et les consequences du pessimism," in *Essais Sur La Litterature Contemporaine* (1892), and Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892), which positions Schopenhauer as the father of the *fin de siècle* community, were all likely to have been read by Conrad (Knowles and Moore 365).

One of the more significant explorations of how this connection to Schopenhauer manifests itself in Conrad's own work is carried out by Edward Said in *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (1966). Here Said dwells on what he terms "the Schopenhauerian dilemma," Said's term for a "structure of experience" thematized by Schopenhauer and which Said claims is in turn the "dominant mode" of experience that informs Conrad's work (13). The nature of this Schopenhauerian dilemma, as Said characterizes it, is a conflict between losing one's sense of identity and vanishing "into the chaotic, undifferentiated, and anonymous flux of passing time," a morphology of the will Schopenhauer referred to as a denial of the will-to-live, versus the assertion of one's identity such that one becomes "a hard and monstrous egoist" (13). Insofar as the content of world-history is said to be conditioned by the willful action of "Kings, heroes, or adventurers," according to Schopenhauer, this denial of the will-to-live, Schopenhauer's prescribed response to the monstrous ego and the illusion of individuality, can

be construed as ahistorical or even anti-historical in nature (Schopenhauer 378). That is, the expansion of the denial of the will-to-live entails the weaking or possible foundering of developmental history, as the content of such history is conditioned on the illusion of the *principium individuationis* in order to mask the conditions of cosmic suffering that underly all of existence (378). This dilemma as Said characterizes it thus suggests the fragility of human imposed order and history. For Said, Conrad's work repeatedly explores this dilemma posed by Schopenhauer in an attempt to find a possible "equilibrium of character" between these two modalities of the will (13), indicating that Schopenhauer's dilemma and its implications concerning the fragility of human imposed order were of central importance for Conrad's thought.

(*ii.*) *Nietzsche:* Conrad's connection to Nietzschean nihilism has also been of interest for the field, with his connection to Nietzsche being framed more in terms of affinities and a shared genealogical connection to the problematic of nihilism, or as Said puts it, a "common cultural patrimony" ("Conrad and Nietzsche" 65). Edward Said's 1976 essay "Conrad and Nietzsche," which is concerned with the possible affinities between Nietzschean nihilism and Conrad's work, attempts to show how both respond to a shared problematic. Beginning with the question of Conrad's nihilism, Said argues that Conrad, like Nietzsche, believed "the world to be devoid of anything except spectacular value" and lacked belief in any metaphysical world (72-73), a position which together informed a literary aesthetic characterized by perspectivism (69), the play and cohabitation of opposites (71), and a tendency towards enigmas and inconclusive experience in which there is no clear teleology within his stories. Directly echoing Said's claims, Fredric Jameson writes of thematic affinities between Jean-Paul Sartre and Conrad's work,

writing that both writers are informed by the "common patrimony of Nietzschean nihilism" and the effort to "imagine what kind of things are possible if God is dead" (248).

Along with these philosophical affinities there are more explicit textual connections between Nietzsche's and Conrad's work as well. The first appearance of Nietzsche's works in English translation was in 1896, at which point his ideas were very much "in the air" of English letters (Whitehead 122). George Bernard Shaw first reviewed Nietzsche's work in *Saturday Review* in 1896 and Havelock Ellis wrote several essays on Nietzsche in *The Savoy* in 1896, where one of Conrad's own stories, "The Idiots," appeared in the same year (122). According to Whitehead, by the end of the century there were as many as sixty articles and book reviews on Nietzsche published in English, as well as several books entirely devoted to him (122). Whitehead argues that there is some evidence that Conrad discussed the ideas of Nietzsche "with understanding," as he explicitly referred to Nietzsche's ideas in at least two letters, one to Edward Garnett in September 1899 and one to Ford Madox Ford in 1903 (122).

George Butte, referencing Thatcher's 1970 study *Nietzsche in England, 1890-1914*, suggests that aside from English translations, Conrad could have also encountered more of Nietzsche's works in French translation. In the early 1900s, French translations of *The Birth of Tragedy* and other works unavailable in English at the time were circulating in English literary circles, with readers including Arthur Symons, who was an editor of *The Savoy* as well as someone Conrad personally admired (Butte 162). Butte suggests that the reference to "Silenus" as a name of the bar the anarchists and nihilists of London convene at in Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) was very likely a reference to the Silenus of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, whose wisdom discloses that the very best thing would be "not to *be* born, not to be, to be *nothing*" and that the second best thing is simply "to die soon" (Nietzsche xvii). Though there is no concrete evidence

that Conrad had read *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1897, the year "An Outpost of Progress" was

published, he was possibly familiar with the work around this time as an article discussing the

book had been published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in November, 1897, a magazine which

Conrad also published in and which he claimed to read every month (Whitehead 124). Whether

Conrad was explicitly familiar with *The Birth of Tragedy* at this point or not, it is nonetheless

striking that at the conclusion of "An Outpost of Progress," the main character Kayerts, in a

moment of frenzied epiphany, discovers the "highest wisdom," as the narrator puts it, that life is

"more terrible and difficult than death," an insight that is strikingly similar to that of Nietzsche's

Silenus (Conrad 86).

1.3   Critical Approaches: The Nihilistic Implications of Conrad's Skepticism

Having sketched some of the broader intellectual context that informed Conrad's

engagement with the question of nihilism, this section will turn to more specific critical

discussions of Conrad's nihilism in order to distinguish between three ways of interpreting this

issue in his work, in turn distilling a critical framework though which Conrad's "An Outpost of

Progress" may be read in section 1.4 of this chapter. For these three critics, the question of

Conrad's nihilism and its relation to his suspicion of progress hinges on the "nature and degree"

of Conrad's skepticism (Peters 123). In this sense these discussions have primarily focused the

question of the limits of human knowledge and how these limits may or may not impact notions

of progress and civilization. As Peters frames the discussion, debates concerning nihilism in

Conrad's work have largely revolved around the topic of skepticism, with Peters citing J. Hillis

Miller's *Poets of Reality* (1969) as the first to characterize Conrad's skepticism as a form of

nihilism (124). For critics like Peters, a central question concerning Conrad's work is whether

Conrad's skepticism, reflected in Conrad's impressionistic or perspectival textual strategy, runs the risk of slipping into a nihilistic solipsism and ethical anarchy that would undermine enlightenment values of progress and civilization, or whether he is able to elide or even overcome this possibility. Critics like Miller and Freedman have framed Conrad's skepticism in different terms, however. For Freedman, Conrad's skepticism should be read in terms of a pessimistic horror of truth itself, wherein illusions are existentially rather than epistemologically necessary; that is, illusions and appearances function as defense mechanisms which shield us from some darker reality that is "too terrible to bear" (Freedman 5). In this latter case, Conrad's nihilism is construed as a cosmic or metaphysical nihilism, in which subjective impressions, indeterminacy, and illusions, especially the illusion of civilizational progress, are the necessary mechanisms by which we shield ourselves from that nihilistic insight that would otherwise undermine the human's preference for existence. Lastly, for Miller, Conrad's ambivalence towards knowledge and human consciousness is not attributed to an underlying cosmic horror, as Freedman's reading suggests, but rather is due to his attunement to a sense in which the knowledge production of civilization can be linked to a logic of exterminating violence. In this type of reading, Conrad's diagnosis of nihilism is directed more towards a particular trajectory of human societies which is narrower in scale and more historically contingent in nature, as opposed to being an ahistorical metaphysical truth. Here I will reconstruct Peters's argument as it pertains to Conrad's skepticism and its consequences, to then in turn outline the alternative manners in which Freedman and Miller have framed the problem of Conrad's nihilism, considering in each case the implications of Conrad's possible nihilism for notions of progress and civilization.

Peters raises the question of Conrad's possible nihilism in *Conrad and Impressionism* (2001), which aims to uncover the underlying philosophical presuppositions belonging to Conrad's literary impressionism. For Peters, impressionism and its corresponding epistemological presuppositions are key to any study of Conrad insofar as they directly shape the "narrative technique" deployed throughout Conrad's work, and these epistemological presuppositions are in turn what lead to the question of nihilism as a possible consequence. For Peters, impressionism is in the first place not just a movement in the visual arts, but it is an artistic technique undergirded by specific epistemological claims and which is historically situated as a reaction to scientific positivism and literary realism (7-8). For Peters, the representational techniques of literary realism and naturalism were heavily influenced by the prevailing positivistic tendencies in the sciences of the nineteenth century, which tended to see all phenomenon as purely physical phenomena, privileging empirical data in a project to construct a correct or accurate representation of reality. In turn, certain naturalist writers, like Émile Zola (1840-1902) for instance, theorized that the novel was a kind of laboratory experiment and controlled environment through which human behavior and its reactions to physical stimuli could be observed and analyzed (Peters 8). In contrast to this view, thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), and Henri Bergson (1859-1941) are said to have challenged the scientific positivism of the time and complicated the notion that some universal truth could be wrested or extracted from an observable and objective reality by way of strict empirically oriented methodology (11). According to Peters's characterization, impressionism emerged as part of this broader intellectual countercurrent which instead emphasized the epistemological process as something that was individual rather than universal and as always already mediated by human subjectivity, in turn

destabilizing notions of epistemological certainty. As Peters describes it, "Impressionism saw all phenomena filtering through the medium of human-consciousness at a particular place and time, thereby representing knowledge as an individual rather than a universal experience" (3).

This tension between some universal truth extracted by empirical methods and subjective and singular moments of impressionistic experience comprises the framework through which Peters approaches the question of Conrad's nihilism. For Peters and many other critics, the question concerning Conrad's nihilism emerges directly out of this general problem because if it is assumed that the epistemological process and knowledge are essentially individual in nature, then this subjectivist model runs the risk of isolating the individual and slipping into a radical relativism wherein all knowledge is thrown into question, including the disintegration of knowable ethical principles such that a form of ethical nihilism is unleashed. That is, for Peters, "epistemological solipsism" and "ethical anarchy" are the primary risks of impressionism's privileging of human subjectivity as the place of knowledge. As Peters emphasizes, this solipsism has further consequences for the very notion of western civilization, because if there is no absolute foundation of knowledge or shared framework for the acquisition of knowledge, then this undermines the legitimacy of one set of values over another set of values. As Peters puts it: "Throughout Conrad's works, the relativity he demonstrates regarding the knowledge of objects of consciousness and of the foundations of western civilization leads to a relative universe, and this relative universe is Conrad's ultimate concern" (126). If the solid and absolute foundation western civilization is predicated upon collapses, then the meaning and certainty of this world-view likewise run the risk of dissipating (138).

While Peters suggests that the risk of ethical nihilism and the dissolution of narratives of progress are some of the formative problems which Conrad's work responds to, he concludes by

arguing that Conrad was ultimately unwilling to simply acknowledge solipsism as "the final consequence of his epistemological investigations" (135). According to Peters's reading, Conrad responds to the "isolation and despair" of epistemological solipsism and ethical anarchy, along with the delegitimization of "western civilization's ethical values," by instead arguing for a model of intersubjective consensus building in his work. As Peters puts it, "consensus among human subjects concerning phenomena and consensus among members of society concerning moral values avoid the abyss of ethical anarchy and ethical solipsism" (135). Peters supports this by rather selectively observing that in all of Conrad's Marlow narratives, Marlow ultimately tries to "obtain consensus concerning his knowledge of phenomena," and more broadly, Peters claims that Conrad's characters "consistently embrace consensus concerning their own epistemological experience" (137-139). Whether this is true for all of Conrad's characters and why these selectively chosen characters should be privileged over others with regards to the outlined problem is not as clear in Peters's account. Despite this "embrace" of consensus building that Peters stresses in his reading, he admits that Conrad "clearly rejects any absolute foundation for western civilization," exemplified for instance by Kurtz's "disillusionment concerning the certainty of western values" in *Heart of Darkness*, where the incongruence of the Africans' beliefs in relation to Kurt's belief in western civilization threatens the certainty of his values and prompts his reactionary call to "Exterminate all the brutes!" (139-140).

However, despite this rejection of some kind of absolute foundation, Peters suggests that Conrad ultimately re-affirms "adherence to western values in general," only this adherence is not qualified according to epistemological claims regarding the certainty of those values, but rather through a pragmatic belief that western values provide "for orderly social interaction" (140). These values provide for "safe social interaction" (142) and are facilitated through "human

communion" (146). Thus for Peters, the escape from a nihilistic solipsism is staged in Conrad's work through an acknowledgement of the other's existence and experience, intersubjective consensus building as the basis for a coherence theory of truth, and a belief in the pragmatism of western civilization's values rather than their epistemologically certain foundation. Peters thus recasts the problematic of nihilism in Conrad through a kind of liberal democratic pragmatism, characterizing Conrad's project as one that is fundamentally concerned with maintaining the legitimacy of western civilization while simultaneously seeking an alternative basis for that legitimacy.

In "Conrad and the Anxiety of Knowledge" (2010), Freedman approaches the question of Conrad's nihilism in a less conciliatory manner, arguing that Conrad is not as concerned with the inaccessibility of truth due to an epistemological structure of the mind, as Peters described it. Instead, Freedman interprets what is often taken to be Conrad's skepticism as a dynamic of psychological repression reacting to menacing and horrific truths that are simply "too terrible to bear" (5), truths like the "cosmic meaninglessness of human life" (2) the "utter futility of existence" (6), and the "ultimate meaninglessness" of one's actions (9). Freedman claims that familiar Conradian themes such as the illusoriness of truth and truth's unintelligibility or indeterminacy are not to be read as reflections of Conrad's impressionistic aesthetic or of the epistemological skepticism which undergirds this aesthetic, as Peters had claimed. Instead, Freedman somewhat counterintuitively proposes that for Conrad truth is always "waiting and discoverable," only it is comprised of "terrible truths" which are psychologically or even existentially difficult to bear, with Conrad's literature thus staging a "darkly serious play of reluctance, aversion, self-deception, and recoil" (5). In other words, for Freedman, the problem of Conrad's skepticism is not rooted so much in epistemological limitations but rather in an

existential aversion to truths which are undesirable and yet believed to be accessible to experience (5). Problems such as the limitations of language and a suspicion of language's abstractions are deemphasized by Freedman, who instead frames the problem as it appears in Conrad's work less as a fixation on the problem of language's inherent representational limitations and more so a reflection of implicit existential psychology according to which human consciousness relies on linguistic deception as a technique to avoid or inflect what otherwise would be anxiety producing truths.

According to Freedman's reading then, what Conrad's work continually stages is the anti-revelation of some horrible truth which always lurks beneath the surface and is at risk of "importunate eruption into consciousness" (6). Freedman sees this anti-revelatory dynamic at play in *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, wherein Marlow's lie to Kurtz's betrothed marks a "protective refusal" of a truth that is "too terrible to bear" (6). That humans move within a world of illusions is not an epistemological limitation so much as an existential necessity, according to Freedman's reading, evidenced by reference to the narrator of *Victory* who declared that without illusions men would "renounce life early and the human race come to an end" (qtd in Freedman 6). Further, Freedman claims that Conrad's equation of the truth with something terrible and anxiety inducing is evidenced by the way in which his narratives often suggest the interchangeability between truth and something which is evil or pestilent. Truth and evil are posited as substitutes for one another in *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, with Marlow describing the wilderness as something "great and invincible, like evil or truth" (qtd. in Freedman 7). In "The Return" the narrator of the story describes a crowd of moving people as men "fleeing" from "something concealed – like truth or pestilence" (qtd. in Freedman 7). Later in the story, the narrator declares that it is only the cultivation of appearances which shields us from the

"ugliness" of truth (7). In Conrad's work as well as in his correspondence there is a profound "anxiety" towards truth, and in Freedman's reading the concealment of this truth is portrayed as "necessary to sustain sanity, morality, and life" (11). Conrad's work, as Freedman construes it then, both posits the possibility of the revelation of this terrible truth as well as the need for the non-revelation of truth so as to shelter human life against its own self-annihilating possibilities.

For these reasons Freedman's reading concludes that, in Conrad's view, traditional Enlightenment values like reason and clarity of thought are not necessarily seen as inherent virtues, and in turn Conrad does not try to rescue the legitimacy of civilization in the way that Peters tried to argue. As Freedman writes of Conrad: "consciousness and reason are not unequivocal virtues, but instruments of awareness better dulled than sharpened" (9). Citing Conrad's *Victory,* Freedman highlights how the "habit of profound reflection" is taken to be a negative consequence of civilization by the narrator of the story (9), a claim which echoes statements from Conrad's own correspondence concerning the tragic nature of human consciousness (8). Whereas for Peters the problem of nihilism referred more to the risk of potential solipsism should the subject become too enclosed within itself, with Peters's reading stressing Conrad's attempt to rescue us from this outcome by instead arguing for a mode of intersubjective consensus building according to which the legitimacy of western civilization's values can be resecured, Freedman's reading by contrast suggests that Conrad's nihilism refers to a lurking metaphysical horror, with our self-enclosure within a realm of obscuring illusions being the only defense against an otherwise annihilating energy. In doing so Freedman implicitly posits Conrad as opposed to certain aspects of Enlightenment and as someone who questions the extent to which civilization can be understood as a mechanism for progress, as it instead seems to intensify the risk of exposure to these nihilistic and even suicide inducing truths. In Freedman's

reading, the numinous realm is inverted into a source of terror against which the characters in

Conrad's text must do everything to shield themselves. Linguistic deception is thus less a

representational obstruction preventing access to a numinous realm beyond ourselves and more

so a defense mechanism to shield ourselves from its underlying horror. In this way the tendency

which promotes reason and a clarity of reflection, if it proceeds beyond certain limits, is actually

cast as detrimental to this instinctual survival mechanism of avoidance and self-deception.

Lastly, Miller raises the question of the relation between Conrad's skepticism and his

nihilism in *Poets of Reality* (1965), where he similarly diverges from Peters by placing more

emphasis on Conrad's "darker vision" (Wollaeger 54). Nihilism for Miller is explicitly

characterized in terms of the "world-wide expansion of western man's will to power," a process

he suggests is intertwined with western imperialism (6). Miller's work begins with the claim that

the orienting problem of Conrad's work, and of other Anglo-modernists like W.B. Yeats, T.S.

Eliot, and Dylan Thomas, was the problem of twentieth-century nihilism. For Miller then, similar

to continental writers like Dostoevsky, Mann, Gide, Proust, and Camus, these twentieth-century

Anglo-modernists likewise grappled with an experience of nihilism in their work, suggesting the

transnational nature of the problematic of nihilism. As he writes in his introduction: "Conrad is

part of European literature and takes his place within as an explorer of modern perspectivism and

nihilism" (6).

Situating Conrad's work within this trajectory, Miller argues that Conrad's nihilism

emerges out of a tragic recognition that man is "cut off from the truth of the universe" (18). Like

Peters's reading in this sense then, Miller argues that Conrad's pessimistic pathos as well as the

perspectival literary technique employed by his writing should be understood as symptomatic of

his general recognition that there is no "sovereign power" outside of man and thus no fixed

standard of conduct to orient man's ethical life. Accordingly, in this situation, ethical terms are at risk of having no meaning (18). Unlike Freedman's psychological reading in which we deceive ourselves from recognizing a horrible truth that continually threatens us, Miller believes that a central issue orienting Conrad's work is instead the "gap between man and world," and a recognition of the "dark truth" that the human is exiled from the truth of universe and imprisoned in a "nightmarish realm of illusion" (17-18), suggesting severe limitations to the Enlightenment project which strove to achieve a "happy match between the mind of man and the nature of things," as Francis Bacon once put it (qtd. in Horkheimer and Adorno 1).

However, while Peters's reading similarly posed such a "gap" as the primary problem of Conrad's literature, his reading of Conrad's impressionistic skepticism suggested that Conrad viewed this gap as an epistemological fact, belonging to the structure of human consciousness, whereas Miller's reading instead suggests that for Conrad the problem is more historically contingent in nature. This is because, according to Miller's reading of Conrad, the nightmare illusion in which man has become entangled is produced and intensified specifically through the mechanism of civilization, rather than a static and ahistorical epistemological or linguistic gap. Further, in contrast to Freedman, who recognized a kind of historical logic in Conrad only it was superimposed on top of a more ahistorical metaphysical claim, insofar as he suggested that for Conrad certain aspects of civilization have intensified the risk of one's exposure to a cosmic and existentially devastating truth, Miller's reading instead suggests that for Conrad the "horror" ushers more precisely from the particular historical development that is civilization. As he writes, "civilization and each man in it move farther from reality the more completely the humanizing of the world succeeds" (18). In response to this, Miller argues that the primary concern of Conrad's work is the need to try and break this relation through a phenomenological approach focused on

pure qualities and impressions without interpretation or meaning in an attempt to gesture towards the "true world 'buried under the growth of centuries'" (qtd. in Miller 26). According to Miller's reading of Conrad then, human history itself is framed as the nightmare, its trajectory the source of modern nihilism.

For Miller, what is central to the question of Conrad's nihilism then is the concept of civilization and its relation to knowledge and truth. According to Miller, Conrad defines civilization as "the metamorphosis of darkness into light," ostensibly directed towards ends of enlightenment and progress, though often carried out by means of imperialistic violence (14). Civilization is a process which transforms "everything unknown, irrational, or indistinct into clear forms, named and ordered, given a meaning and use by man" (14). Civilization as Miller describes it is characterized by its devotion to work, efficiency, the triumph of technology, universal calculation, the procrustean transformation of the world according "to man's measure," and the expansion of the human will toward unlimited dominion over existence (6-16). In naming and labeling the unknown, civilization produces a "closed circuit of reciprocal interchanges" to protect itself against doubt and the paralysis of the will, as well as the "anarchic" power of "atavistic ways of life" (16-17). Ultimately, according to Miller, Conrad conceives of civilization as the process by which meaning is "wrested from the wilderness," oftentimes by way of a logic of extermination. That is, elements which are excessive to these processes are eliminated in order to maintain and secure the stability and coherency of civilization's systems of meaning production. For instance, Kurtz's call to "Exterminate all the brutes!" at the end of his letter in *Heart of Darkness* reflects the logic of a civilizing process which has failed in its efforts at conversion or assimilation of the native people, resorting instead to a genocidal logic of elimination. Similarly, the professor character in *The Secret Agent*, who

walks around London with a bomb strapped to his chest, handing out dynamite and prepared to explode himself at any moment, exclaims in the text: "Exterminate, exterminate!...that is the only way of progress," alluding to the nexus between notions of civilizational progress and processes of extermination (qtd. in Miller 52).

In Miller's reading, civilization and the ideals it produces are thus, in Conrad's eyes, a "lie" (17). As Miller writes, Conrad "sees civilization as an arbitrary convention, resting on no source of value outside humanity" (42). While the legitimacy of "collective social ideals" may be threatened if civilizational values are seen as illusory and fabricated, the lie largely conceals itself through its near monopoly on both meaning production and violence (17). The lie of civilization is not necessary to maintain an "ideal," preserving a space for transcendent thinking to combat against nihilistic solipsism, as Peters characterized it, but instead for Miller's reading the lie serves to obfuscate and enable a violent will to power which underlies western ideals of progress and civilization.

Further, according to Miller's reading, the project of Conrad's work is *not* intersubjective consensus building, as Peter construed it, which was ultimately a liberal and pragmatic solution to the problem of skepticism and its negative implications for the stability and expansion of civilizational forces. While Peters casts Conrad as concerned primarily with the process of consensus building, and this supposedly is the way through which the coherency of a system of truth can be maintained in spite of the dissolution of uppermost values, that is, liberal pragmatism as a solution to nihilism, Miller's reading of Conrad instead characterizes this process as the proliferation of a "closed circuit of meaning" enforced through a violent expansion of the civilizational will to power. Accordingly, Miller stresses in his reading that Conrad's goal is to "lift the veil" of the civilizational illusion and the violence of the sheer will-to-power which

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underwrites it (19). For Miller, Conrad's project is characterized as one of "demystification," in which he attempts to disclose moments wherein the closed circuit of meaning produced and enforced by the lie of civilization begin to break-down or are exposed for being illusions propped up by the threat of violence. This is how Miller frames Conrad's fixation on encounters of this system with the atavistic, the anarchic, and the wilderness, as these are phenomena which are mediated through civilization's circuit of meaning but which also contain some "darkness" that threatens to exceed or destabilize it insofar as they contain exceptions to the civilizational norm (Miller 19). Thus, whereas Peters understood nihilism as a possible *consequence* of a solipsistic predicament staged in Conrad's work, referring to the breakdown in the stability and coherency of the project of civilization since there is no shared objective basis upon which one set of values can be established and which can only be preserved through liberal-pragmatic consensus building, for Miller's reading, by contrast, the civilizational process *is itself nihilistic*, a machine driven by the sheer will to power and undergirded by the threat of violence, and Conrad's work actually seeks to expose the illegitimacy of the civilizational knitting machine that is predicated on "truths" which are underwritten by the threat of violent extermination.

From surveying these three types of readings, which are meant to represent three ways in which the question of Conrad's nihilism has been interpreted, it is evident that in each case nihilism has been characterized in rather different terms. For Peters, Conrad's nihilism refers to the risk of a relative universe, a consequence of epistemological subjectivism, in which ethical norms as well as the project of civilization more generally would risk losing their sense of legitimacy. For Freedman, by contrast, nihilism refers more to the recognition of cosmic meaninglessness that is typically obscured by everyday discourse, and the risk of exposure to this underlying truth does not issue from skeptical self-enclosure but, inversely, the breakdown of

life-sustaining illusions in which the subject normally seeks shelter. Lastly, Miller's reading, like Peters, stresses a gap or incommensurability between truth and the illusions of human consciousness, only this gap in not thought of ahistorically as an epistemological structure of the human mind but rather as a historical condition which emerges with and is intensified by the development of civilization. In Miller's reading then, nihilism for Conrad refers doubly to processes of civilizational assimilation and extermination, and to the nightmare illusions which are produced out of these processes and which dominate the consciousness of the civilized subject.

1.4   Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress" and His Threefold Characterization of Nihilism

Following from the intellectual historical background of Conrad's engagement with the transnational problematic of European nihilism traced in section 1.2 and the critical discussions concerning Conrad's nihilism that were summarized in section 1.3, this section performs a close reading of Conrad's short story "An Outpost of Progress" alongside his correspondence from the same period in order to articulate and clarify the three types of limitations that together comprise the contours of what I refer to as Conradian nihilism. In doing so, I show that each of the three interpretations outlined in section 1.3, while providing productive insight into certain aspects of Conrad's nihilism, fail to capture the tripartite structure of Conradian nihilism, each interpretation being constrained to only an aspect of the overall problematic. At the same time, it is important to recognize that in terms of the existing textual evidence there is nothing to suggest that Conrad possessed anything like a systematic philosophy, with his thoughts and opinions instead being quite fluid and changing over time, or as Conrad himself described it in a January

14th letter to Cunninghame Graham, "belief's shift like mists on the shores" (65). Rather than claim that this reading of Conrad's engagement with the problematic of nihilism reflects Conrad's thought on the whole then, the aim here is to capture a certain moment in his oeuvre, contemporaneous more or less with the publication of works such as "An Outpost of Progress" (1897), and *Heart of Darkness* (1899), in which his thought approached and grappled with a particular series of nihilistic possibilities that together throw into question the limits of ideals of human knowledge, agency, and historical progress.

I have chosen to focus on this moment in Conrad's *oeuvre* for several notable reasons. Firstly, while the chronological boundaries of modernism are vague, one general reason for focusing on this 1897 text is that it falls squarely in line with most critical chronologies as an early-modernist text. In "The Problematics of European Modernism," Richard Sheppard suggests 1885-1935 as the chronological boundaries of modernism which has the most consensus, although he notes that some critics start as early as 1870 to include Nietzsche, and as late as the 1950s to include writers like Nabokov, William Carlos Williams, and artistic movements like abstract expressionism (1). Bradbury and McFarlane, as the subtitle of their book suggests, prefer the range of 1890-1930. If Erdinast-Vulcan's claims that Conrad's thought, especially from the late 1890's, should be situated in relation to the "intellectual unease of the *fin de siècle*," then the text can be said to straddle the line between *fin de siècle* and early modernist literature (92). Beyond chronology, there are several thematic and contextual reasons for focusing on "An Outpost of Progress" for this investigation: The story's (*i.*) ironic narrative treatment of European notions of progress, (*ii.*) the context of its publication, and (*iii.*) the interaction of this story with Conrad's own correspondence all suggest that this work should be read as an explicit

engagement with these questions concerning the limits of human knowledge, agency, and historical progress that together comprise the problematic which I term Conradian nihilism.

(*i.*) The narrative of "An Outpost of Progress" is often cast a prototype for Conrad's Heart *of Darkness* (1899) due to its setting in the Congolese jungle, its ironic treatment of European colonial endeavors, especially insofar as these endeavors sought to ground their legitimacy on Enlightenment notions of historical progress, and the overall pessimistic register of the tale wherein an inscrutable horror seemingly lurks beneath the surface of the narrative activity. In this short-story, Kayerts and Carlier are two Europeans employed by the "Great Trading Company" who are sent into the Congolese jungle for six months to maintain and oversee an ivory trading post, which the story ironically refers to as an "outpost of progress" (67). This outpost is akin to the trade posts that Marlow encounters in *Heart of Darkness* during his journey upriver, which he initially characterizes as a "beacon on the road towards better things, a center for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing" (*Heart of Darkness* 40). But whereas the narrative of *Heart of Darkness* is mostly anticipatory in orientation, following Marlow's journey up the Congo river as he hopes to encounter the mythic Kurtz, an "emissary of science and progress" (30), "An Outpost of Progress" is more forthrightly pessimistic in orientation: If Kayerts and Carlier are to be taken as emissaries of civilization, they never are able to sustain the myth of progress in the way that Kurtz is, instead being described outrightly by the narrator as "insignificant and incapable individuals," with the story casting them as essentially trapped at their outpost wherein they are confronted by a "strange" and "incomprehensible" wilderness which in its "pure unmitigated savagery" proceeds to test the "civilized nerves" of the European subject against a radical negation of the social conditions and institutions which ordinarily imprint and sustain that subjectivity (68-69). That is, as Conrad's

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story itself announces, the tale explores how the principles, morals, and emotional life of the civilized subjects, who in the tale initially view themselves as "pioneers of trade and progress," will react in a situation characterized by the narrator as a "negation of the habitual," by the subtraction of "the crowd" and institutions of power and force which ordinarily shape their emotional and moral lives and which normally undergird their belief in some notion of progress (69-72). In staging this experiment, the story explores the psychological and moral breakdown of its two European characters, culminating with Kayerts's suicide, but in doing so, it also raises critical questions concerning the legitimacy of the very ideals of progress and civilization that serve to sustain and orient these characters.

(*ii.*) More broadly, the context of the publication of Conrad's story would further suggest the text's aim of critically interrogating notions of progress and civilization, especially in terms of how such ideas were leveraged to provide justification for imperialist expansion. As Wallerstein points out, the construction of the capitalist world economy was built on the ideological notion that European expansion would spread "something variously called civilization, economic growth and development, and/or progress" (1). It is with this kind of conceptual relationship in mind that Lindqvist claims the concluding scene of Conrad's 1897 short story would have evoked a considerable shock-effect due to the context in which it was published. This is because 1897 was the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, the 60th anniversary of Queen Victoria's reign but more generally an occasion to celebrate the imperialist exploits of the British Empire (Lindqvist 12). This enthusiasm was largely reflected in the issue of *Cosmopolis* in which Conrad's story first appeared, with for instance another article entitled "The Reign of Queen Victoria" by the author Richard Temple wishing to celebrate "the expansion of the Empire, its material development, its progress in all matters that are

demonstrable by statistics" on the occasion of this event (621). At the end of Conrad's story, however, the managing director of the so-called "Great Civilizing Company" alights from his steamer and approaches the deserted trading station, enshrouded by the obscuring mists of the Congolese jungle, to be greeted by the purple face of Kayerts, former chief agent of the outpost of trade and progress, corpse hanging from a cross by a leather strap, his swollen tongue "irreverently" protruding. If Temple's article serves to index a certain imperialist optimism, in its attempt to frame the British empire's expansion in terms of development and progress, then Conrad's story, and the protruding purpled tongue of Conrad's suicided agent, "irreverently" projected towards the director of the Great Civilizing Company, would have likely been read as a rebuke of any European colonial enterprise which had predicated itself on its belief in civilizing progress.

(*iii.*) A third reason for considering Conrad's story as a point of entry for his literary engagement with the theme of nihilism is the significant interaction between the short story and discussions Conrad was having through his correspondence at the time, as suggested most clearly by this concluding scene of the story and his reference to it in his letters. That is, Conrad seems to have viewed the protruding tongue of Kayerts's corpse as an emblem for the story itself and as an image which crystallizes these questions concerning the limits of human knowledge, agency, and historical progress. In a letter addressed to his longtime friend and confidant Cunningham Graham, dated January 14, 1898, Conrad specifically mentions the upcoming publication of "*The Outpost*" in a volume of short stories, referring to an anthology later to be entitled *Tales of The Unrest* and published April of 1898 by T. Fisher Unwin, London. As he writes: "There will be a *Vol* of short stories app in March. One of them *The Outpost*. Now if you are really anxious to give me a good slating… 'Put the tongue out' why not? One ought to really. And the machine

will run all the same. The question is whether the fatigue of the muscular exertion is worth the transient pleasure of indulged scorn" (65). Conrad's suggestion to "put the tongue out," appearing in quotations in the letter, appears to refer in the first place to the criticism he is anticipating upon Graham's reading of the story. However, Conrad's singling out of "*The Outpost*" in particular amongst this forthcoming anthology suggests he is also referring to the culminating scene of his story, which concludes with the line: "And, irreverently, he was putting out a swollen tongue at his Managing Director" (89). In addition to a kind of critical scorn Conrad playfully anticipates from his reader, the "transient pleasure of indulged scorn" mentioned in Conrad's letter seems likely then to refer at the same time to the "irreverence" of Kayerts's protruding tongue, the final image of Conrad's short story. If this parallel between Conrad's two protruding tongues is taken seriously, the tongue of scorn in the context of letters and criticism and the tongue of irreverence in the context of the suicided agent, then the questions and insights which immediately follow in Conrad's letter may also be read in relation to *An Outpost of Progress*, thus helping to distill the problematic which informs that work.

Specifically, this oft cited "dark letter" of January 14th is taken to be central to critical conversations revolving around the question of Conrad's nihilism because it consists of a series of claims about human limitations which immediately follow the reference to "An Outpost of Progress" and the image of the protruding tongue. Together the claims comprise the contours of what I am referring to as Conradian nihilism. In laying out this problematic, Conrad raises questions concerning three types of limitations: (*1.4.1*) the limits of human knowledge, especially as it is mediated through language and memory; (*1.4.2*) the limits of human agency, that is, what Conrad takes to be the impotence of the individual will in relation to the overdetermining inhuman will of "the machine"; (*1.4.3*) lastly, Conrad refers to the limits of

human development in relation to a principle of cosmic entropy, and the tragic nature of progress given these limits. From here this chapter elaborates on each of these three limits while also using them as a framework for interpreting Conrad's short story so as to better pinpoint the scale and intensity of Conrad's nihilism.

1.4.1   The Limits of Human Knowledge

Critical concern with Conrad's skepticism, the first type of limitation invoked in Conrad's letter to Graham, has led to a range of different characterizations of those limits: in a word, are these limits primarily epistemological (Peters), existential (Freedman), or more historically contingent (Miller) in nature? To recall, Peters argued that epistemological skepticism beyond a certain point can lead to an ethical nihilism, Freedman suggested that, for Conrad, limits to knowledge are existentially necessary due to the horror of certain underlying truths, such as cosmic meaninglessness, and Miller had argued that Conrad's skepticism is directed more towards the illusory and fabricated nature of civilizational values, linking this form of knowledge production to a logic of exterminating violence and casting civilization itself as nihilistic in character. This range of different interpretations, outlined in section 1.3 of this chapter, is likely due in part to the fact that there are several dimensions to Conrad's skepticism, with him explicitly positing at least two different ways of thinking about the question of these limits in his letters.

First, in a December 14th 1897 letter to Graham, Conrad suggests that there is a certain tension between knowledge and life as a vitalizing force. That is, Conrad believed that knowledge could be potentially harmful for human flourishing if it crosses beyond a certain threshold. There is, in the manner of Freedman's characterization, a risk of too much

consciousness for the human subject. In this letter, Conrad refers to Singleton, one of his literary

characters, in order to ruminate on the nature and benefits of education. For Conrad, Singleton

embodies a specific form of knowledge, which leads Conrad to suggest that there are different

types of knowledge whose value should be considered in relation to their potential for human

flourishing. First, there is the knowledge of how to live, which Singleton was in possession of,

and consequently he "was in perfect accord with his life" (53). For Conrad, Singleton is

representative of someone in possession of an intuitive non-rational knowledge that lacks

consciousness of darker truths, and his ability to flourish is predicated specifically on this non-

knowledge. As he puts it, Singleton "is simple and great like an elemental force" (53). By

contrast, hypothesizing what an "educated" Singleton would look like, one versed in scientific

and philosophical discourse (Platonism, Pyrrhonism, Emerson), Conrad asks his addressee:

"Would you seriously, of malic prepense cultivate in that unconscious man the power to think.

Then he would become conscious—and much smaller—and very unhappy," suggesting that the

scientific and philosophical cultivation of consciousness brings with it the risk of exposure to a

form of cosmic alienation and unhappiness (53). Beyond this scientific and philosophical

knowledge, which Conrad suggests can be worthwhile within limits but which carries with it this

risk, there is a third and even more malignant type of knowledge: The most life-threatening type

of knowledge, beyond scientific and philosophical knowledge, is self-knowledge. That is,

Conrad questions the value of the Socratic injunction to "know thyself," because if one were to

truly know themselves then they would understand "that thou art nothing, less than a shadow,

more insignificant than a drop of water in the ocean, more fleeting than the illusion of a dream,"

invoking here something like the "Schopenhauerian dilemma" which Said saw as central to

Conrad's thought (54). The ultimate insight of self-knowledge, for Conrad, is the disclosure of

the insignificance, insubstantiality, and illusory nature of the self, an insight which could prove deadly for living.

However, Conrad frames the problem differently just a month later in the January 14th 1898 letter to Graham, the same letter which contains his reference to *An Outpost of Progress*. At first, Conrad refers to similar ideas when he claims that "reason is hateful" because "it demonstrates that we, living, are out of life—utterly out of it" (65). In this case, the valence of the claim echoes his former letter in that reason is once again framed as threatening due to its potential for the devaluation of life. However, there is more ambiguity in how Conrad is thinking about our aversion to these life denying insights. For following this, he writes: "Life knows us not and we do not know life—we don't even know our own thoughts" (65). In this case there is more of a disjunction between life and knowledge as it is implied that we cannot "know" life, whereas in the former letter Conrad allowed for a "knowledge of how to live," in distinction from other forms of knowledge as the medium though which one could be exposed to underlying, life-devaluing truths. That is, although the relation between knowledge and life was framed as potentially harmful in the former letter, the relation between the two concepts was still conjunctive in nature—one could have a direct bearing on the other; in the second letter, these terms are framed as disjunctive in nature—life cannot "know" us and we cannot "know" life, suggesting a sort of incommensurability between these terms. This disjunction is further compounded as Conrad moves on, when he states that "Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit" (65). With this, Conrad adds a further complication to his theory of knowledge and its relation to life, because he suggests that there are representational limits at the linguistic level, with half of our words being meaningless and the other half being arbitrary designations,

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suggesting a kind of semantic nihilism. Continuing on, he suggests a third level of remove

between knowledge and truth by ascribing an aspect of temporal decay to both knowledge and

language: as he writes, "thoughts vanish; words, once pronounced, die; and the memory of

yesterday is as shadowy as the hope of to-morrow" (65).[4] While the capacity to ascribe linguistic

markers to things depends on a degree of fixity for those ascriptions to be meaningful, in

claiming that there is a capacity for oblivion which underlies all linguistic ascription Conrad is

suggesting that memory's capacity to forget both supersedes, language's fixity and undermines it.

Not only is language arbitrary in terms of its structural relation to reality then, but the forgetting

both of memories and of language itself adds a further limitation on the capacity for knowledge

to develop in a sequential or for that matter teleological manner: knowledge, language, and

memory are instead cast as ephemeral and situational in nature.

Do the claims in these two letters signal a contradiction in Conrad's thought concerning

the limits of human knowledge then, or is it possible that these two framings are consonant in

some manner? The situation Conrad presents us with between these two letters is the tension

between the knowledge of our nothingness (the disclosure of illusory nature of the self) and non-

knowledge (the incapacity to know thyself, semantic nihilism, instability, and ephemerality of

knowledge), two possibilities which he seemingly oscillates between. Whichever possibility we

entertain, it can nonetheless be concluded that Peters's characterization of Conrad's nihilism as

referring to the "risk" of solipsism is incorrect, a misreading of the problem with which Conrad

is concerned. For in either case, the possibility of the knowledge of our nothingness or the

impossibility of this knowledge (due the disjunction between life and knowledge, linguistic

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[4] This signals an inversion of certain philosophies of language, for instance that of Thomas Hobbes, in which
language is cast as a pre-condition of memory insofar as its function is to assign marks of remembrance and
differentiation to singular things which otherwise would simply appear and disappear from experience.

mediation and arbitrariness, and the decay of memory), self-knowledge is framed as near impossible and, even if this veil were to be broached, it would disclose only a void which undergirds the ego. That is, solipsism understood as the belief that reality is entirely a self-projection is impossible according to the limits of Conradian subjectivity here because in either case, the case of non-knowledge or the knowledge of our nothingness, the self is either insubstantial or simply not a reality that one is able to access. However inconsonant the two types of limitations Conrad proposes might be with each other, solipsism, which Peters took to be the risk of impressionistic subjectivism taken to its extreme, is not a real possibility according to these two types of limitations and thus a misdiagnosis of the problem that Conrad is grappling with.

Turning to "An Outpost of Progress," the narrative frame of the text marks the first respect in which Conrad's short story begins to explore these questions of the limits of human knowledge, although the text's exploration of the inscrutability of meaning is staged in a more subtle manner when compared to Conrad's other works from this period. Conrad's Marlow trilogy, for instance, consisting of *Youth* (1898), *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and *Lord Jim* (1900), are all structured according to a dual narrative frame in which the voice of Marlow recounts past events from his life, constructing a story within a story in front of an audience, allowing Marlow to reframe his recollection of past events as an occasion for "moral and philosophical enquiry" (Simmons 77). Thus, whereas these stories all thematize to varying degrees the limits of human knowledge, there is at least a certain explicit clarity as to the structures of mediation that contributes to this problem: a subjective narrator provides a dramatized oral account in front of an audience of a past event or experience recalled from memory, and as was indicated by his January 14th 1898 letter to Graham, Conrad considered both linguistic communication and

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memory to be unreliable. The levels of remove from the event itself are manifold, but they are clearly identified by the narrative framing of the text.

The narrative frame of *An Outpost of Progress,* by contrast, is more ambiguous in this regard: told from a third-person perspective, there is no context for who the narrator is, why the story is being recounted, or the level of knowledge the narrator actually possesses. While the story is told in the past tense, there is no context for the occasion of this retelling of events, and there is no real reason to trust the information that the narrator provides. Adding to this ambiguity, the narrator of "An Outpost of Progress" oscillates between moments of omniscient insight into the interior thoughts of the characters and moments of opaqueness in which it is only possible to observe outward appearances whose meaning is unclear, which renders either narrative modality suspect, at least initially, since the extent to which the narrator can provide insight into the interiority of the story's subjects or be relegated only to outward appearances seems to signal an inconsistency within the narrative. Rather than the text explicitly establishing certain limits of meaning by highlighting the structures of mediation belonging to the dual narrative framework, the theme of the limits of knowledge is instead implied through these ambiguities surrounding the text's narrative frame and this tension it stages between moments of narrative omniscience and opaqueness.

These narrative ambiguities in relation to the Marlow trilogy are more a matter of degree than of absolute difference, however, as these oscillations between moments of narrative omniscience and opaqueness are not entirely arbitrary in the story and do seemingly abide by certain parameters. Specifically, it can be noted that the unidentified narrator of "An Outpost…" repeatedly takes on an omniscient tone when providing insight into the interior thoughts of the story's "civilized" characters ("He felt suddenly…" (69), "They both thought they had heard

shots…" (76)), and by contrast the narrator seems to experience moments of epistemological

blindness in which he seemingly only has access to the outward appearance of things when

describing the wilderness, that is, the outer zone around the outpost which has not yet been

subsumed by civilization. In the text, the wilderness that surrounds the outpost is characterized as

"strange" and "incomprehensible" (69), the river and the forests surrounding the outpost are

described by the narrator as a "great emptiness," and the brilliant sunshine, rather than serving as

a source of orientation or illumination and clarity, instead is said to have "disclosed nothing" to

the two European characters (71). Even more confounding for the narrator and the two European

characters is how things in the surrounding wilderness simply appear and disappear in an

unconnected way (71), discordant with logics of sequence, teleology, or cause and effect

according to which disparate phenomena without apparent aim might normally be assigned a

broader sense of meaning or intelligibility. As the narrator describes it, "Things appeared and

disappeared before their eyes in an unconnected and aimless kind of way" (71). Further, as

Kayerts and Carlier continue to languish at the outpost and this sense of meaningful distinction

and sequence increasingly diminishes for the characters, this enclosure within an unintelligible

wilderness threatening to envelop them contributes to their loss of memory. Describing this

process, the narrator says, "The images of home; the memory of people like them, of men that

thought and felt as they used to think and feel, receded into distances made indistinct by the glare

of unclouded sunshine" (82). Despite a certain kind of omniscience that the narrator seemingly

possesses when describing the interiority of the story's two European characters, Conrad clearly

introduces limits to this knowledge in relation to the surrounding wilderness and the gap between

it and the consciousness of the story's European subjects. Its failure to comport with logics of

sequence or aim threatens to dismantle the memory of the story's characters as both their sense

of distinction between events and their own sense of self diminishes, echoing the dynamic discussed in his January 14th 1898 letter whereby the disjunction between knowledge and life, the limits of linguistic representation, and the oblivion of memory collectively limit the possibilities for human knowledge.

Although a kind of meaninglessness threatens to engulf the outer horizon of each character's world as they risk an encounter with the nature surrounding this outpost of progress, it is clear from the narrator's descriptions that this meaninglessness is not a claim concerning the insubstantiality of nature but rather its indifference from the perspective of the text's European subjects, as well as the corresponding risk of the disintegration of their frame of reference as they languish in the jungle at their outpost of supposed progress. This is evidenced by the fact that Conrad's narrator attributes at the same time an underlying vitality to nature such that, despite its perceived inscrutability, the encounter with this wilderness can provide "mysterious glimpses of the vigorous life that it contained" (69), a characterization echoed later in the story when the forests surrounding the outpost are described as "throbbing with life" (71). The narrator's description of "mysterious glimpses" into this nature here suggests a certain tension with the claim that these characters are coming up against absolute epistemic limits, instead suggesting a capacity for "glimpses" behind the veil whereby the narrator is able to detect a throbbing substance that simultaneously resist meaning and linguistic ascription as it is limited to only broad characterizations.

In the first place then, Conrad's narrator describes nature as containing a vitalistic energy which not only resists systems of human knowledge but which constantly threatens to undermine these systems, suggesting a distinction between, on the one hand, the discursive surface which the main characters seek to sustain so as to maintain a sense of meaning and their general sanity,

and on the other hand, an inscrutable and indifferent force which threatens to rupture and dissipate this discursive surface. Secondly, the fragility of this discursive surface in relation to its encounter with nature, combined with the possibility of obtaining "glimpses" of this force, suggests a degree of interpenetration, in other words, that these worlds are clearly not entirely incommensurable from the perspective of Conrad's narrator. This would suggest a dynamic closer to Conrad's December 14th 1897 letter wherein it is possible to obtain glimpses behind the veil of everyday illusions, albeit potentially deadly glimpses. It is the integrity and coherence of the characters' discursive illusions which must be maintained then, or else, like an educated Singleton, they risk exposing themselves to the groundlessness of their orienting beliefs and values.

If the narrator experiences a kind of opaqueness, or at least near opaqueness, when describing the wilderness surround the outpost, then as was noted, the narrator of "An Outpost of Progress" seems to paradoxically possess a sort of omniscience when describing the interior thoughts of the story's two main characters. But rather than signaling a simple contradiction on Conrad's part, this omniscience is narratively necessary in order to frame another aspect of the problem of the limits of knowledge. Specifically, this omniscience is deployed in order to highlight the necessity of dissimulation for the story's characters, that is, the disjunction between thought and speech, wherein some aspect of the character's interior thoughts must be suppressed in order to maintain the integrity of their shared discursive illusion and to ward against the threat of exposure to the surrounding wilderness. This dynamic is represented most often through the narrator's description of the interior thoughts of the story's three main characters, Kayerts, Carlier, and Makola, and the immediate juxtaposition of these thoughts with some speech act or a textual document which contradicts the content or mood of their interior thoughts.

For instance, near the beginning of the story, this dynamic of dissimulation is first introduced when Kayerts and Carlier first arrive at the outpost of progress at which they have been newly assigned. As they pass by the grave of the outpost's former chief, who had died from the heat of the jungle, the two jocularly comment on the situation of ease in which they supposedly find themselves, with Kayerts shouting, "We shall let life run easy hear! Just sit still and gather in the ivory those savages will bring" (70). At the same moment these optimistic dreams are expressed, however, Kayerts experiences an "inward shiver" as he tries to suppress the thought of the sun killing his partner and subsequently having to bury his corpse, thinking "It would be awful if I had to bury him here," a possibility which befell the former captain of the outpost before Kayerts's and Carlier's arrival (70). In this scene, the threat of one character's death represents a threat of the extinction of a shared frame of reference which otherwise has no basis in the environment in which they find themselves. The characters' shared dreams of an easy life in the jungle are contrasted with the interior anxiety of each other's mortality, demonstrating the necessity for dissimulating appearances, illusions and surface-level experiences in order to preserve the character's sense of meaning and orientation in the jungle.

In Conrad's much later novel *Victory* (1915), a similar emphasis on the necessity of illusions and dissimulation for human survival is referenced when the story's protagonist Heyst declares, "Every age is fed on illusions, lest men should renounce life early and human race come to an end" (70), and similarly, "The barbed hook, baited with the illusion of progress, to bring out of the lightless void the shoals of innumerable generations!" (121). These pronouncements by Heyst, which could be compared to the more pessimistic statements of philosophers like Schopenhauer or Leopardi, propose that the human's preference for existence over non-existence, and the very futurity of the human species itself, is predicated on surface-

level illusions and appearances, and in particular for these characters, the illusion of progress. Thus, in "An Outpost of Progress," Kayerts's and Carlier's anxiety concerning each other's death does not spring from some sort of moral or empathetic engagement with the other's personhood, but from a discursive dependence on each other which allows them to sustain the myth that they are agents of progress and their sense of orientation in the jungle more broadly. Paralleling the tension highlighted within Conrad's own correspondence from this period, what the text stages then is the conflict between non-knowledge, experienced as an epistemic limit, and the knowledge of one's nothingness, experienced in the text as the groundlessness of one's frame of reference in relation to the disorienting indifference of nature that gradually erodes the orienting illusions of the two main characters, with the narrative oscillations between moments of opaqueness and omniscience being deployed to tease out the structure of knowledge which underlies this conflict.

In the second half of this story the tension between these two possibilities culminates with Carlier's violent outburst and Kayerts's subsequent "epiphany," triggered by a breakdown in communication between the two European characters after staying at the outpost of progress for some time, which really has not produced anything akin to progress but rather only a sense of stagnant desperation as the silence of the wilderness continues to engulf the two characters. As the narrator characterizes the situation, "out of the great silence of the surrounding wilderness, its very hopelessness and savagery seemed to approach them nearer, to draw them gently, to look upon them, to envelop them with a solicitude irresistible, familiar, and disgusting" (82). This silence, referring to the inscrutability and indifference of the surrounding wilderness, carries with it the threat of hopelessness because it exceeds and antagonizes the dissimulative illusion the two characters attempt to sustain through their communication with each other. It is at this same point

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that Carlier and Kayerts attempt to establish communication with the tribes in the surrounding jungle, but as soon as they set out in a canoe they are met with "a shower of arrows" and must return to the station. As Brantlinger points out, "Victorian imperialism both created and was in parted created by a growing monopoly on discourse," and African customs which could not be assimilated within this discursive framework were "despised and demolished" (196). Thus, the failure to establish an open line of communication with the native people, signaling a discursive disjunction between the two frames of reference, leads a frustrated and feverish Carlier to declare "the necessity of exterminating all the niggers before the country could be made habitable" (82). Anticipating Kurtz's letter from *Heart of Darkness*, which similarly calls for the need to "Exterminate all the brutes!" (62), this reactionary conclusion reflects a point in the logic of the characters whereby the failure of progress as an assimilating force necessitates instead the violent subtraction of all elements excessive to their discursive frame of reference, an extreme conclusion which marks the point in both texts wherein the notion of progress as a purely productive ideal becomes most suspect and in which the groundlessness of their frame of reference becomes most visible.

This failure to establish a line of communication with the native people isolates the two characters further at the outpost and coincides in turn with a breakdown in the characters' communication with each other, eventually triggering a murderous struggle between the two characters and Kayerts's subsequent epiphany. At this point in the story the two characters' conversations are no longer driven by a need to sustain the illusion of progress, as that illusion has seemingly collapsed entirely with Carlier's outburst. Isolated at the outpost, hearing nothing from back home and their mission a total failure, Kayerts thus becomes increasingly silent after this outburst, while Carlier, no longer modulating his inner thoughts to appeal to his partner,

instead becomes "hoarse, sarcastic, and inclined to say unpleasant things" (83). As the days pass from this point onwards, the speech between the two men becomes increasingly antagonistic: "when the two men spoke, they snarled; and their silences were bitter, as if tinged by the bitterness of their thoughts" (83). Without an orienting illusion to align the two character's interests, the gulf between the two characters only intensifies until Kayerts begins to perceive Carlier as a total stranger: "He had never seen that man before. Who was he? He knew nothing about him" (84). While initially the experience of non-knowledge was projected onto the surrounding wilderness, with the characters being concerned for each other's well-being insofar as they both participated in a shared frame of reference and shared sense of futurity, the breakdown of that dissimulative illusion reinvests their relationship with a new sense of uncanniness whereby they appear only as antagonistic strangers to each other, becoming entirely isolated not just in relation to the indifferent jungle but in relation to each other as well. After a chaotic and feverish fight breaks out between the two characters, Kayerts discovers that he has murdered Carlier with a revolver, a realization which pushes Kayerts into a moment of "deep thought," a protracted epiphanic experience wherein he begins to plumb "the depths of horror and despair" (87). While in this state of pre-suicidal meditation, Kayerts comes to the conclusion that life is "more terrible and difficult than death," echoing the wisdom of Nietzsche's Silenus as his preference for non-existence seemingly overrides his preference for existence. As the night approaches Kayerts sits by the corpse of Carlier continuing to meditate on this realization, "thinking very actively, thinking new thoughts" (86-87).

The "new thoughts" which strike Kayerts in this moment hardly cast the murder as an instance of solipsistic anomie, as Peters might wish to characterize it, for rather than a moment of subjectivist self-assertion Kayerts's sense of self seems to break down and disintegrate entirely

here, with the narrator stating that he has "broken loose from himself all together" and that all of his old "thoughts, convictions, likes and dislikes" appeared to him in their "true light," that is, as "contemptible and childish, false and ridiculous" (87). Like Singleton's hypothetical cultivation of self-knowledge, Kayerts's moment of self-knowledge consists only of the disclosure of the insignificance, insubstantiality, and illusory nature of the self. The narrator refers to Kayerts's double realization—that his sense of self is an illusion and that life is more terrible than death— as Kayerts's "new wisdom" and later as the "highest wisdom," a declaration which coincides with a dissociative moment in which Kayerts can no longer discern the distinction between his own body and Carlier's corpse, no longer able to tell who is living and who is dead (87). Rather than a struggle culminating in the recognition of the other and instantiating a sense of individuality, the murder is a kind of Hegelian struggle gone wrong wherein the destruction of the other plunges Kayerts into a state of utter negativity, leading in turn to his suicide.

To return to the question of how the limits of human knowledge are staged in Conrad's text, "An Outpost of Progress" seems to reflect Conrad's own ambivalence on the manner as expressed is his December 14th and January 14th letters to Graham, while also positing a possible solution to this tension. The narrative frame of the text, divided between moments of omniscience and opaqueness, is deployed to highlight the experience of non-knowledge in the encounter with the wilderness, while the narrator's omniscient knowledge of the characters' interiority is deployed in order to highlight the necessity of dissimulation for maintaining a shared discursive illusion. Further, in the text's conclusion, this omniscience is needed to highlight the possibility of an epiphanic mode of experience that obtains a "glimpse" of a normally inaccessible form of knowledge. The gradual breakdown of this discursive illusion of progress which both characters try to maintain culminates in their violent encounter with each

other and Kayerts's epiphany, triggering a protracted moment of insight akin to the "glimpses"

behind the veil of nature which the narrator occasionally obtains in the story, only this "glimpse"

behind the veil of these discursive illusions of progress and selfhood in which he was formerly

invested reveals a knowledge of his own nothingness and the "highest wisdom" of all, that life is

more terrible than death.

Between Peters's and Freedman's readings of the problem of nihilism in Conrad's work,

it would appear then that Freedman offers a stronger interpretation of the problem insofar as his

characterization of the limits of knowledge in existential rather than purely epistemological terms

comes closer to capturing Conrad's position. For, as was shown, Conrad posits a certain

flexibility to certain epistemic limits by suggesting the possibility of an epiphanic mode of

experience, while at the same time suggesting the importance of these limits of knowledge for

living, lest such an epiphany expose one to life devaluing insights. Further, Peters's insistence

that Conrad's nihilism must refer to the risk of solipsism founders when read in relation to an

"An Outpost of Progress," which in its most nihilistic climax stages a moment of self-dissolution

rather than of the reification or projection of the self.

1.4.2   *"The Machine" and The Limits of Human Agency*

When Conrad asks Graham in his January 14th letter whether the fatigue of sticking out

the tongue is worth the "transient" pleasure experienced in the act, Conrad raises this question in

relation to the figure of the "the machine." As he puts it in his letter, what is the worth of this

momentary gesture if "the machine will run all the same" (65)? The implication in this instance

is that, while an act of symbolic rejection expressed by the tongue may yield a sort of momentary

pleasure, it is a gesture characterized even more so by its impotence in relation to this "machine"

and its operational logic, that is, how the machine runs. This figure of the machine, a figure which seemingly haunts Conrad's thought from this period, appears in several other letters as well as in "An Outpost of Progress." Just as Conrad tries to tease out a structure of the limits of human knowledge in "An Outpost of Progress" and his adjacent correspondence, Conrad's figure of the machine recurs throughout these texts as a way of thinking through the limits of human agency in relation to the logic of civilization, marking the second aspect of Conrad's threefold characterization of the problematic of nihilism. As will be shown, if one distills the "operational logic" of this machine, it can be inferred that Conradian horror is not simply a static metaphysical or cosmic horror, a horror produced in relation to the supposed indifference and aimlessness of nature, but rather it is also characterized by a particular developmental logic which shapes the possibilities of human agency. By considering Conrad's various references to this machine it will become possible to better trace the logic of this technological will and how for Conrad it affects the limits of human agency.

One month previous to his letter to Graham on "An Outpost of Progress," in a letter dated December 20, 1897, Conrad makes his most well-known reference to this machine, which he tries to describe to Graham using the image of a knitting machine: "There is a—let us say—a machine. It evolved itself (I am severely scientific) out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold!—it knits" (56). Thus from out of an assemblage of raw iron emerged the knitting machine. For Conrad to say that this machine "evolved itself" is to say that there is no actor or principle outside of the machine that guided its development. Instead, its teleology is internal to itself, its moment of emergence seemingly spontaneous in nature, and thereafter it is driven only towards its own self-replication and expansion.

From the outset it can be observed then that this machine subverts what we may take to be the typical relation between man and machine. To illustrate this by way of contrast, machines and tools in Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), for instance, are described as one of the fundamental features of civilization, behaving as prosthetics through which man may perfect his own organs and remove the limits to their functioning. For example, motor power enhances the power of the muscles, ships and aircraft enhance the power of movement, telescopes enhance the power of sight by neutralizing distance, and photographs and gramophones enhance the power of memory. In this sense of machinery, the machine is a prosthetic for the heightening and extension of power and knowledge, mechanisms for the abolition of human limits (37-39). As Freud writes, "Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God" (38-39).

Conrad's knitting machine by contrast, as a kind of technological will which absorbs and overrides the human will, is thus figured in strikingly different terms insofar as it is characterized by the imposition of limits on the human will, rather than a mechanism for the abolition of those limits. This is because the knitting machine is not characterized as a subordinate extension of the desires of man, it is not a tool or technology to be harnessed by humans primarily for their reproductive processes or to enhance their power. Instead, there is something profoundly inhuman about this machine which is able to harness a kind of reproductive and developmental power independent of human intelligence or action and in relation to which the human is powerless. As Conrad writes, continuing, "It knits us in and it knits us out," suggesting the human is but a resource or raw material for the machine, perhaps not unlike the raw iron from which the machine evolved, as it knits us in and out of existence (57). Read in this way, the nihilist Professor of Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, who walks around London with a bomb strapped to his chest in preparation to exterminate those around him, is not leveraging the technological

capacities of the explosive device as a prosthetic to enhance his will so much as he has been

subsumed by the device itself and its technological will to detonate. In any case, although the

human will seems incapable of affecting the trajectory of the machine, as its teleology is internal

to itself, it would not be correct to claim the relation between the machine and humans is entirely

incommensurable: the consumption of the human by the machine suggests the human serves as a

reserve of energy harnessed for the machine's self-replication and expansion.

To return to the question Conrad poses to Graham in his January 14th letter—is the

fatigue of the exertion of sticking out the tongue worth the transient pleasure, if the machine will

run the same?—it can be said then that the action and exertion of energy associated with sticking

out the tongue are in question because, as Conrad says, the machine's inexorable expansion is

unaffected by a symbolic gesture of rejection since it possesses its own teleology which is

internal to itself and which overrides the human will. Conrad thus frames his question in terms of

a calculus of expenditure: is the expenditure of the gesture worthwhile if it is immediately

consumed in a fragile and monadic moment of negation that has no direct impact on that which

is outside of it? This dynamic whereby the agent's exertions are consumed by the machine

suggests an asymmetrical relation between the individual human will and the superordinate

counter-will of "the machine," which is undisturbed by the individual agent's act of rejection.

The motion of the machine is not hindered by the actions of the individual agent; it runs "all the

same," for human action seemingly has no effect on its course of development.

Thus, following from his characterization of the knitting machine in his December 20th

letter, the developmental trajectory of this machine's motion is autonomous in relation to the

human will. If Kayerts's gesture in "An Outpost of Progress" is read in these terms, it must be

read then as a gesture of impossibility ushering from a powerless human agent in relation to an

absorbing inhuman will, a will understood by Conrad to be technological or machinic in nature. Significantly then, this developmental trajectory of the machine is markedly different from the characterization of the wilderness by Conrad's narrator, which was described primarily in terms of its lack of telos and as a space of the appearance and disappearance of things without aim or connection. The developmental logic of the machine that emerges out of iron, in contrast with this characterization of nature, suggests that the machine is not just a description of some sort of abstract law of nature which is cosmic in scale, but it is thought more so at the scale of civilization, a leviathan driven by a logic of extraction, expansion, and possibly extermination, as Carlier's outburst suggests.

Whereas Freedman's characterization of Conrad's nihilism recognizes the risk of exposure to life-devaluing insights, framing the problem more in existential terms rather that absolute epistemic limits or solipsism, it still characterizes this risk as informed by an underlying cosmic horror that is thought at a cosmic scale, characterizing the problem in fundamentally ahistorical terms. What is recognized as historical in Freedman's account, tendencies of reason and civilization, are supposedly cast as suspicious by Conrad only because of their capacity to increase the risk of undermining our life-enhancing illusions—a point that was suggested in his letter on an educated Singleton—but in this sense the historical trajectory of civilization is merely supplemental to an underlying cosmic horror which is immutable and ahistorical in nature. As Conrad framed it in his letter, some knowledge is needed to sustain these life-preserving illusions, but this knowledge must stay within certain limits as there is the risk of too much consciousness of an underlying existential horror. But is it indeed the case that for Conrad the structure of this horror is fundamentally ahistorical in nature and entirely cosmic in scale? To what extent can Conradian horror be characterized as historical then and how does he

characterize its relation to civilization? Conrad's figure of "the machine" is salient to these questions because, as was shown, according to Conrad's characterization of the knitting machine it abides by a particular developmental logic which appears to be fundamentally at odds with the logic of nature, as it was described by the narrator of Conrad's story. Thus, Conrad's figure of the machine troubles a certain aspect of Freedman's reading by suggesting that Conradian horror is not just a trans-historical or static metaphysical horror, but rather it is characterized by a particular developmental logic which shapes the possibilities of human agency and which interacts with processes of human development. Closer to Miller's reading of Conrad's nihilism then, there is a kind of horror which Conrad seems to be attributing to the civilizational knitting machine as well.

In "An Outpost of Progress" this lack of agency in relation to an overriding machinic will guided only by a logic of expansion and self-replication is reflected not just in Kayerts's concluding suicidal gesture, but more broadly in the rivenness of Conrad's characters, a point discussed above in relation to the limits of human knowledge. As was argued, the discontinuity the text posits between one's interior and exterior life is framed as necessary for dissimulation and maintaining the coherency of the character's mission at the outpost of progress. If the thesis that Conrad's machine is more a figure of civilization than of an abstract cosmic force is taken seriously here, the character's dissimulative illusions are not just sustained so as to protect against the indifferent aimlessness of the wilderness and the cosmos more generally, but also in response to the overriding threat of violence ushering from "society" and its "strange needs" (70.)

Interrupting the progression of the narrative to elaborate on this dynamic, the narrator explicitly describes how the characters have been pressed into their roles by way of a kind of

overbearing machinic will, which the narrator links more so to human society rather than to nature: "Society, not from any tenderness, but from its strange needs, had taken care of those two men, forbidding them all independent thought, all initiative, all departure from routine; and forbidding it under pain of death. They could only live on condition of being machines" (70). If Kayerts's and Carlier's interior life is flattened it is thus also because their bodies and life activity have been absorbed entirely into the machinic currents of the civilizational process. That is, the action of these characters does not originate from their individual decisions to comport themselves towards some particular end, let alone some sort of ideal or uppermost value, they are not enlightened subjects, in Kantian sense, with the freedom to think for themselves and engage in public debate, but their ends are dictated to them through the structures of society under the threat of violence, their existence contingent on the suppression of independent thought and their subordination to routinizing structures. It is the machine's power over life and death ("under pain of death") which presses them into their roles and affords them their limited existence.

In his essay "What is Enlightenment?" (1784), Kant claims that an age of Enlightenment would be marked by the latent though largely unrealized possibility of humanity's release from its self-incurred immaturity, a release which, when realized through thought and discussion in the space of the public sphere, creates the conditions of possibility for a process of gradual improvement and progress that would not need to be carried out through violent revolution. Notably, at the end of his essay, Kant provides a second characterization of the unenlightened state of man, no longer simply of immaturity (implying a capacity for maturity that has not been realized), but instead more specifically of the machine: As he writes, the government find it "to its advantage to treat men, who are now more than machine, in accordance with their dignity" (5), suggesting that the distinction between an enlightened and unenlightened age might also be

characterized as man's release from a machinic mode of being ("als Maschine"). Thus if

Kayerts's and Carlier's presence in the jungle is initially cast as a project of spreading progress,

than this characterization founders upon the thoughtlessness of Kayerts and Carlier, who must

become as if machines in order to preserve their existence. The possibility of liberal consensus

building and independent thought does not exist under these conditions that the story describes.

The progress being spread by this outpost is recast then as a hollow progress, purely mechanistic

in nature, enforced under threat of death, aiming only to absorb material for its reproduction and

expansion. The story posits a contradiction then between these characters' supposed project of

spreading progress and the actual source of the decision to carry out this work.

This contradiction is made most evident upon Carlier's and Kayerts's arrival to the

station, where they discover an old newspaper which provides them with a kind of mission

statement in support of their civilizing work. "Mission statements," as the sociologist Michael

Mann points out, were always developed by empires in order to offer "more elevated motives"

for imperialist expansion aside from "mere profit or insecurity" (21). These mission statements

deflect attention away from the militarism and violent intervention of imperialist processes in

order to give "a sense of moral uplift to the imperialist themselves" and a sense they were

"collectively bringing civilization and Enlightenment to the world" (21). The mission statement

which Kayerts and Carlier find and immediately identify with is described as follows:

That print discussed what it was pleased to call our "colonial expansion" in high-flown

language. It spoke much of the rights and duties of civilization, of the sacredness of

civilizing work, and extolled the merits of those who went about bringing light, and

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faith, and commerce to the dark places of the earth. Carlier and Kayerts read, wondered

and began to think better of themselves. (72-73)

The mission statement Kayerts and Carlier read tries to convince its readers that it is not a

sheer extractive logic which guides the outpost's operations, but rather the spread of light, faith,

rights and duties to the uncivilized darkness of the peripheral zones. The notion of progress

articulated here is thus tantamount to the spread of civilization and framed in terms of a

metaphorics of light versus dark, similar to Miller's characterization of civilization in his

reading. But there is an immediate irony to this statement, insofar as Kayerts and Carlier only

discover the mission statement *after* arriving to the outpost and thus they come to identify with it

retroactively, after they have already traveled to the station from Europe and taken command.

That is, the mission statement is not what directs and orients them from the outset of the story,

but rather there is a lateness to its discovery as it retroactively provides meaning for their project,

to lend it a morally uplifting purpose, underwriting the formative fiction of civilizational

progress and providing them with a sense of purpose to defend against the outlying void of the

jungle which otherwise threatens to engulf them.

This overriding machinic will of civilizational expansion which presses its subjects into

their roles is similarly depicted when Conrad's narrator introduces Makola, a character who is

described in markedly different terms from Kayerts and Carlier. As the narrator describes him,

Makola, Kayerts's and Carlier's assistant at the outpost originally from Sierra Leone, "spoke

English and French with a warbling accent, wrote a beautiful hand, understood bookkeeping, and

cherished in his innermost heart the worship of evil spirits" (67). Makola is described then as the

most competent and cultivated character in the entire story, mastering multiple European

languages and the ability to write, not just competently but "beautifully," thus exhibiting the intellectual and aesthetic markers of the civilized and cultured European subject. Further, his competency in bookkeeping underscores his successful absorption as a commercial actor into the logics of commerce and trade. Thus if the civilizing project is conceived in one sense as one of conversion or absorption, of the transformation of "darkness" into "light," Makola himself would seem to signal the success of this process. Yet in the same stroke the ability to successfully perform the markers of a civilized subject are discontinuous with an interior set of commitments and beliefs, with Makola in his "innermost heart" worshipping "evil spirits" and harboring a secret hatred for Kayerts and Carlier (67). In contrasting these exterior behaviors with Makola's interior beliefs and commitments, this rivenness throws the nature of the entire civilizing process into question, for though Makola retains some sense of independent thought, in contrast with Kayerts and Carlier, he must suppress these thoughts entirely in relation to the civilizational knitting machine and its power over life and death ("under pain of death"), a latent threat which becomes most visible in the moment of Carlier's outburst, when the logic of assimilation seemingly reaches its limits.

If a distinction can be made between the inscrutable horror of the wilderness and the mechanical horror of the knitting machine, Conradian nihilism thus entails a double existential threat for the human being: the threat of exposure to the aimlessness and indifference of nature, as well as the threat of consumption by the civilizational knitting machine which abides by its own developmental logic, pressing human subjects into their roles and wielding a power of life and death over them as it knits them in and out of existence. Freedman's account of Conrad's nihilism has the advantage of recognizing the first modality of horror, but it fails to attend to the second because it does not allow for such a distinction, in other words, it does not consider that

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the structure and scale of Conradian nihilism is manifold in nature. As Conrad depicts it in "An Outpost of Progress," civilizational progress, be it substantive or illusory, is hardly a genuine escape hatch from the indifferent aimlessness of the wilderness, instead absorbing human material for its own expansion and pressing the various characters into their roles, with the expression of a human will diminished either through a total suppression of one's beliefs, in the case of Makola, or to a minor symbolic gesture of rejection, such as the ejected tongue protruding from a hanging corpse, left to decompose in the heat of the jungle.

1.4.3   A Frozen Universe and the Limits of Human History

If a distinction can be drawn between Conrad's characterizations of a vitalistic though indifferent wilderness, without aim or telos, and the developmental logic of the civilizational knitting machine, which aims only towards its own expansion, there is a third aspect to the problem of nihilism which Conrad describes in his January 14th letter to Graham. Extrapolating from the image of the protruding tongue, questioning the worth of the expenditure of energy crystallized in this gesture, Conrad suggests that this question can be raised not just in relation to overbearing will of the machine but also in relation to a second outer limit which circumscribes the machine's developmental logic. As Conrad writes, "the fate of humanity, condemned ultimately to perish from cold, is not worth troubling about" (65). That is, Conrad proposes that any sort of progressive logic attributed to the history of human societies, whether it is substantive or illusory, must ultimately not be worth troubling about if it is destined to relapse back into a final state of coldness. If Conrad tries to tease out a structure of the limits of human knowledge in "An Outpost of Progress" by thinking this question in relation to the perceived indifference of nature, and if Conrad's figure of the machine recurs throughout these texts as a way of thinking

through the limits of human agency in relation to the logic of civilizational expansion, this entropic logic, the tendency towards a final condition of solar exhaustion and planetary frozenness, marks the third aspect of Conrad's threefold characterization of the problematic of nihilism, thought at a scale beyond that of just human civilization as discussed in section 1.4.2.

According to Conrad, even if one were to bracket off suspicions of the idea of progress and its entanglement with civilizational violence, the hypothetical perfection marking the end of that developmental trajectory would still nonetheless be inherently fragile and transitory in nature. Expanding on this claim in his letter, Conrad writes, "if you believe in improvement you must weep, for the attained perfection must end in cold, darkness, and silence" (65). Conrad distinguishes here between modes of historical progress and an alternative structure of entropic decay which is positioned outside of and circumscribes the historical trajectory of human societies. He is therefore not simply rejecting a particular historical model, that of a universal history which progresses over time, to then say that history unfolds according to a different logic. Instead, he is suggesting that no matter the historical model we entertain there is a separate process of exhaustion which must serve as any history's outer limit. That is to say, if there is such a thing as an end of history, such an end would necessarily be unstable and ultimately momentary in relation to this outer limit of exhaustion. In contrast with the principle of autonomous and spontaneous expansion which Conrad attributes to the knitting machine, Conrad thus posits a separate movement of dissipation which unfolds at a different scale but which circumscribes all historical ends, suggesting that all teleologies inevitably converge on this state of exhaustion whose defining qualities are that of coldness, darkness, and silence.

This principle of entropic decay further mediates how Conrad thinks about the limits of human knowledge, as it also figures prominently in his December 14th 1897 letter on an

"educated" Singleton. As was discussed, Conrad believes that an excess of knowledge, and in particular self-knowledge, risks exposing one to life devaluing truths, and thus Singleton is better off with just a simple and unburdened knowledge of how to live. The un-educated Singleton then is capable of achieving a kind of happiness, according to Conrad, if he successfully forecloses the possibility of exposure to his own groundlessness. However, even in such a state, Conrad says, the un-educated Singleton will still be touched by the "curse of decay," suggesting that even the "solution" to the nihilism of one's groundlessness and the domination of the civilizational knitting machine that is offered through a reinvestment in the comfort of illusions, especially the illusion of progress, is not immune to the process of decay which circumscribes these illusions. "Nothing else can touch him," writes Conrad to Graham, except this process of entropy, that is, "the eternal decree that will extinguish the sun, the stars one by one, and in another instant shall spread a frozen darkness over the whole universe" (53). Conrad suggests then that whatever notion of progress we might believe in for the sake of the anti-revelation of life devaluing truths, there must nonetheless be a limit to even this illusion which will inevitably be eroded by this law of entropic decay, returning the world to a state of frozen darkness. It would seem then that during this period, between the publication of "An Outpost of Progress" in *Cosmopolis* and its publication in the *Tales of The Unrest* anthology, Conrad was especially burdened by this thought of the "frozen darkness" which as he understood it must mark the end of the end of history.

While the strength of Miller's reading was that it recognizes a significant historical aspect to Conradian nihilism, rather than reducing it to a purely subjective impression (Peters) or as an ahistorical metaphysical horror which is merely enhanced or supplemented by certain tendencies within human history (Freedman), Miller's emphasis on the role of civilizational expansion as

the primary figure of Conrad's nihilism ends up excluding this alternative structure of entropic decay from his analysis. Miller's reading attributes a destructive or even annihilating logic to Conrad's depiction of civilization, with Miller thus subsuming these destructive processes entirely under the expansionist logic of civilization and its need to establish a closed circuit of meaning over and against nature. This over emphasis on Conrad's critique of civilization leads Miller to neglect this alternative structure of decay which Conrad proposes as well, as an outer limit of all teleological structures that operates on a different scale of time from the civilizational "knitting machine." Secondly, Miller's reading, similar to Peters, stresses a gap or incommensurability between truth and the illusions of human consciousness as the source of nihilism for Conrad, only for Miller this gap is not thought of ahistorically as an epistemological structure of the human mind but rather as a historical condition which emerges with and is intensified by the development of civilization. However, for Conrad, the "eternal decree" of this entropic outer limit is not situated across an incommensurable gap but rather it exerts itself in every moment by instilling a fragility and ephemerality to both the potential happiness found in the non-knowledge of the individual subject and in the idea of the end of history, whether that end is thought of as the completion of a genuinely progressive movement or as the history of a nightmare producing civilization seeking only to expand itself and create a closed circuit of meaning.

The sort of limit which Conrad assigns here to human history might therefore instead be likened to Nietzsche's characterization of the problem in his early essay, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" (1873 / 1896), written just a year after *The Birth of Tragedy* although only published posthumously by his sister. In this early and experimental text, the opening lines of Nietzsche's essay stage a thought experiment which aims to dislodge us from an anthropocentric

scale of time, raising the question of the worth of human "world history" in relation to a much broader scale of time whereby this history will have amounted to only a brief and ephemeral moment. As he writes: "In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the highest and most mendacious minute of 'world history'—yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die" (1). Similar to Conrad's characterization of this tendency towards a state of "frozen darkness," Nietzsche likewise imagines an outer limit to human knowledge and history, similarly framed in terms of an entropic tendency towards coldness and solar exhaustion, with the text further raising the question of how this outer limit might at the same time mediate our own experience in the present. Like Conrad then, Nietzsche is not making a claim about the particular developmental logic of human history, be it universal or otherwise, but rather he is proposing that there must be an alternative structure of exhaustion which circumscribes human history and which unfolds according to a different scale of time.

Commenting on this same passage the philosopher Ray Brassier refers to this notion as the "truth of extinction," that all life is circumscribed by "solar death" or "solar catastrophe." For Brassier, this notion can be distinguished from the logic of historical progress because it marks both the end of the end of history as well as its beginning, that is, as he characterizes it, "terrestrial history occurs between the simultaneous strophes of a death which is at once earlier than the birth of the first unicellular organism, and later than the extinction of the last multicellular animal" (223). In this sense the truth of extinction is something that both has already happened, and which will happen, a structure of reoccurrence which circumscribes history, and thus the "frozen darkness" Conrad describes is not simply a future condition but also

a return to a prior condition. The "frozen darkness" with which Conrad is concerned can thus be further distinguished from Conrad's characterization of the developmental logic of the civilizational knitting machine, not just because it unfolds according to a different scale of time but also because, as a dissipating tendency, it can be thought of as a return to a past condition rather than a process directed purely towards a future end.

In "An Outpost of Progress," this aspect of entropic decay is implicit in the environmental hazards of the jungle surrounding the outpost, particularly in the deadly heat which permeates the air and threatens to kill the various characters of the story. That is, paradoxically, Conrad's concern with the "frozen darkness" which circumscribes human history is necessarily figured in the story as the inverse of this condition, it is expressed in terms of the heat and overwhelming light of the sun as it is experienced by the characters in the jungle, because this condition of solar death is outside of the character's direct experience and their anthropocentric scale of time. If Conrad imagines an alternative structure of entropic decay which circumscribes human history and leads to a frozen world, the sun's expenditure of energy as it is described in the story must be implicated in this structure, wherein it is no longer just a source of the wilderness's vitalistic energy, but beyond the present "throbbing" of life of the jungle around the outpost, as the narrator experiences it, the sun's radiation also points towards this process of expenditure which invariably leads towards a state of solar death and frozen darkness.

In "An Outpost of Progress," it is clear that the sun serves as one of the text's main antagonists, with Kayerts and Carlier discussing the death of the former chief at the outpost, who supposedly passed away from heat exposure. As Kayerts relates to Carlier, after they both arrive at the outpost, "I've been told that the fellow exposed himself recklessly to the sun," trying to

warn Carlier of the hazards of the jungle, but noting especially the dangers of the sun's intense heat (69). For this reason, he orders Carlier to avoid the sun at all costs: "my orders are that you should not expose yourself to the sun!," thus identifying the sun as the one of the main threats to their mission of spreading progress and civilization (69). The developmental logic which they believe themselves to be a part of, at least after discovering their "mission statements" on a piece of paper, is thus contingent on avoiding the sun and its radiating energy as much as possible.

Later in the story, Makola reiterates this danger by warning Kayerts of the sun's capacity to interfere with their mission, saying "You very red, Mr. Kayerts. If you are so irritable in the sun, you will get fever and die—like the first chief!" (79). The sun is the source of irritation for the characters, inducing fevers and discomfort, and in this sense it can be said to be one of the catalysts for Kayerts's murderous breakdown and epiphany wherein he discovers the wisdom of Silenus. Lastly, the sun's heat is posited as not just as a threat to the characters but also to the organic materials around them, as suggested by Makola's comment regarding the ivory tusks the station trades, noting the capacity of the sun to wear down the material if it is left outside: "The sun's very strong here for the tusks," he says, imploring the characters to move it indoors (81). The sun's expenditure of heat is thus marked as a threat not just to the characters and their sanity but also to the primary commercial goods of the station, antagonizing their overall mission of trade and progress.

1.5   Conclusion

Between "An Outpost of Progress" and his letters from this period, Conrad thus distinguishes between three different aspects of nihilism, each characterized by a different teleology or lack thereof, and framed in terms of different scales of time: The indifferent wilderness, as the pure present, is described by the narrator and from the perspective of the

characters in the story in terms of its lack of telos, as a space where things appear and disappear without aim or connection; Secondly, the technological will of the civilizational knitting machine, characterized in terms of a developmental logic unfolding at the scale of human civilization, evolving out of iron and which is driven only towards its own expansion and replication; Third, the "frozen darkness," referring to a structure of dissipation and eventual solar exhaustion that circumscribes the developmental logic of history, unfolding along a cosmological scale of time and, further, characterized in terms of its reoccurrence, that is, that it entails a return to a prior condition rather than simply the realization of a future possibility. The precise relation between these three modalities is unclear, it is ambiguous, because Conrad does not develop anything like a systematic philosophy which can account for how they interact with each other. However, these three distinct scales of nihilism can be distilled from his short story "An Outpost of Progress" and his letters from this period as he explores a constellation of various limitations. That is, each of these aspects of nihilism is explored in Conrad's story and letters in terms of a certain limit, be it a limit assigned to human knowledge, which is both ephemeral and transitory and which must invest itself in discursive illusions to protect itself, the limits of human agency and the paralysis of the human will as the characters are pressed into their roles by the civilizational knitting machine under threat of death, or a limit to human history, in the sense that no matter the precise logic of history, it will be circumscribed by this outer limit of entropic decay and solar exhaustion.

The question of Conrad's nihilism, I would contend then, must attend to these three distinct temporal structures, the scale at which they are carried out, and the corresponding limits they impose. Peters's, Freedman's, and Miller's accounts of Conrad's nihilism fail to develop an analysis of this manifold structure belonging to Conradian nihilism: Peters misdiagnoses

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Conrad's nihilism as limited to impressionistic subjectivism and the corresponding risk of solipsism; Freedman's reading primarily neglects the second aspect of Conrad's nihilism, characterizing his nihilism primarily in terms of an ahistorical and indifferent metaphysical horror from which we must discursively shield ourselves; lastly, Miller's account of Conrad's nihilism, while developing a sophisticated reading of Conrad's portrayal of civilization, particularly western imperialism, as itself a nihilistic process, doesn't sufficiently develop an analysis of this third aspect of entropic decay which as Conrad saw it must circumscribe the developmental logic of civilization. Instead, when Conrad characterizes human consciousness as tragic, as he does in his January 14th letter to Graham, it is because, in its epiphanic glimpses behind the veil, it discovers that it is seated at the nexus of these three modalities of horror: aimless appearance and disappearance, the pure and indifferent present; the expansion of the machine, the unfolding of the technological will and its subjugation of human material; entropy, exhaustion, and dissipation, all circumscribing the outer limits of human history.

Thought in this way, it becomes possible to read another image of Conrad's in terms of this threefold structure. That is, aside from the irreverent tongue protruding from Kayerts's corpse, another image which might possibly be taken as an emblem of Conradian nihilism is Kurtz's scream, "The horror! The horror!," which in the moment it occurs is characterized by Marlow as possibly ushering from a "supreme moment of complete knowledge" (86). From whence Kurtz's horror derives or what exactly it names is one of the great mysteries of the novella. What is the scale of the horror, so to speak, which Kurtz invokes with his last dying breath, and to what does is refer? Though the text stages a rupture of the illusion of progress as experienced by Kurtz, the precise nature of that rupture remains ambiguous and in a certain sense is withheld. Part of the ambiguity of Kurtz's utterance derives from the fact that his scream can

be read as operating on at least three levels of horror: In the first place, in this supreme moment of "complete knowledge" it could signal the epiphanic glimpse of the "highest wisdom," articulated by both Kayerts and Nietzsche's Silenus, that life is more terrible than death. In the second place it could refer to the horror of the imperial project and its atrocities, the collapse of the narrative of civilizational progress which Kurtz formerly stood for as it gives way to a recognition of the civilizational knitting machine, mobilizing human matter towards the increasingly suicidal quest of extraction and expansion. And in the third place it could name a kind of cosmic horror, a horror at the coldness of the universe, of the twilight of decaying stars and the realization that at the end of history "nothing will have happened" (Nietzsche 1).

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CHAPTER 2

THE DIABOLICAL PRINCIPLE: WYNDHAM LEWIS'S CONCEPT OF NIHILISM

AND ITS EARLY MODERN ORIGINS

2.1   Introduction

Beginning as early as 1927 with *The Lion and the Fox*, Wyndham Lewis made reoccurring references to nihilism in his theoretical works, with *The Wild Body* (1927)*, Time and Western Man* (1927), "The Diabolical Principle" (1929), *The Writer and the Absolute* (1952) all further engaging with the concept of nihilism to varying degrees. This chapter traces Lewis's deployment of the concept of nihilism in these works and others, both to unfold another instance of English modernism's engagement with the concept and to further argue for the variability of the concept of nihilism as its meaning and scale was being continually renegotiated within different genres of writing and across national borders. As I show, the concept of nihilism serves as a continuous thread which links Lewis's various critiques, first of the actionist school of philosophy he aligns with Machiavelli and Nietzsche, then of the nihilism of the "time-cult" of Bergson, Whitehead, and others, then of the "romantic nihilists" featured in the modernist journal *Transition*, and lastly of the existential nihilism of Sartre and Heidegger. Despite certain discontinuities between each iteration of the concept as it is deployed in these texts, the concept of nihilism continually serves as a way for Lewis and his various intellectual enemies to think

through their relation to their modern and early modern past, with Lewis reiterating in each case the significance of nihilism's theological dimension.

At the most general level, Lewis's notion of nihilism is rooted in a skepticism of the capabilities of human knowledge, a concern for the limits of human action, and a suspicion of notions of historical progress, themes which were all likewise explored in Conrad's work from the late 1890s. Beyond these broad continuities, however, Lewis's characterization of nihilism is also discontinuous from Conrad's engagement in several distinct ways. First, whereas Conrad's engagement with nihilism was performed primarily in his literature and personal correspondence, Lewis's engagement is more theoretical in orientation and is explicitly explored in his many essays from the 1920s onwards. Whereas Conrad's literary engagements with the concept of nihilism tarry more with the ambiguities of scale and possible implications therein, Lewis's essayistic texts, although at times contradictory or opaque in style, represent a more explicit engagement with the problematic of nihilism. More generally, focusing on Lewis's essays further supports my claim that the meaning and scale of nihilism were not being negotiated solely within philosophical discourse at the time, but rather through a range of different genres and forms of writing which included literature, personal correspondence, and essays. Second, there are genealogical differences between Conrad's and Lewis's engagements: whereas Conrad's most nihilistic moments exhibited certain affinities with ideas expressed by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Lewis's discussion of nihilism is more genealogically rooted in the early modern period. The intellectual background against which Lewis raises the question of nihilism is comprised of figures such as Shakespeare, Machiavelli, Montaigne, and Luther, with Lewis suggesting that certain ideas explored by these thinkers prefigured modern conceptions of nihilism. Alongside this, Lewis's engagement with the concept of nihilism is more explicitly

theological in orientation, with Lewis suggesting that nihilism is at least partially rooted the divergence between Catholic and Protestant traditions of thought. Third, between both writers, there is a difference in the scale at which nihilism is thought: Whereas Conrad's nihilism is thought first at a cosmic scale of entropic decay, and second in relation to the history of civilizational development, allegorized as a knitting machine through which the symptoms of this nihilism are intensified, Lewis writes in favor of an existing perfection, a belief which he aligns with certain Catholic doctrines and in relation to which a notion of cosmic nihilism is incompatible. The historical trajectory of Lewis's notion of nihilism is more limited in scale then, insofar as it is rooted in an early modern tradition of thought and it refers more to a mistaken albeit fashionable strain of thought within European modernity which is characterized by an overinvestment in interior experience, the intuition, and notions of the human will. Nonetheless, the "diabolical principle," as Lewis alternatively characterizes this nihilism, has potentially deadly consequences as it increases extensively in scale, coming to express itself through solipsistic violence and a romanticization of war and revolution. Lastly, there are differences in how the concept of nihilism is rhetorically deployed as support for the political ideas and commitments of the two writers: whereas Conrad's nihilism was partially leveraged as a way of to destabilize certain imperialist notions of progress, Lewis's notion of nihilism is instead used to ground his anti-communist sentiments. Thus, while Lewis likewise responds to the problematic of nihilism, his deployment of the concept in his writing is also distinct from Conrad's in terms of its origin, scale, and intensity, signaling the unsettled nature of the concept in modernist discourse.

This chapter's analysis of Lewis's concept of nihilism is divided into two main sections, with section 2.2 focusing on the ways that critics have characterized Lewis's concept of nihilism,

and section 2.3 then performing a reading of Lewis's many critical essays from 1927 onwards. In section 2.2, I distinguish between three types of critical interpretations which have each characterized Lewis's concept of nihilism differently: For McLuhan, Lewis's notion of nihilism is rooted in theological discourse and various tensions between Catholicism, Gnosticism, and Buddhism; for Weller, Lewis's notion of nihilism is political, with Weller arguing that the nihilism corresponds to the negation of a principle of aesthetic autonomy and the politicization of aesthetics; and for Nath, Lewis's nihilism is purely aesthetic, rather than conceptual, in the sense that Lewis's references to nihilism are mainly literary and are intended to serve a stylistic purpose. In section 2.3, I then turn to a reading of five of Lewis's texts to distill my own characterization of his engagement with nihilism and to show what is lacking in the three critical readings outlined in section 2.2. As I show, while McLuhan is correct to situate Lewis's concept of nihilism in relation to a theological dimension, his specific characterization is not sufficiently qualified with evidence nor does it capture particular aspects of Lewis's argument, especially in terms of how Lewis links European nihilism to Protestantism. Second, Weller mistakenly elides this theological dimension of Lewis's concept of nihilism, and thus his interpretation does not sufficiently characterize the problematic that prefigures Lewis's conception of aesthetic autonomy. Lastly, while Nath aims to stress some of Lewis's early modern influences, such as Shakespeare, over his engagements with Nietzsche, assuming that this demonstrates Lewis's disinterestedness in the concept of nihilism, I instead show that Lewis's concept of nihilism is largely informed through his engagements with the early modern. More generally, whereas Nath aims to deemphasize the significance of nihilism for Lewis's work, I instead show how Lewis was seriously invested in the problematic of nihilism from the late 1920s onwards.

2.2   Critical Approaches: Theological, Political, and Aesthetic Characterizations of Lewis's Nihilism

This section aims to distill three distinct ways in which critics have discussed the concept of nihilism in relation to Lewis's work. Critics concerned with the concept of nihilism in Lewis's work have differed in terms of their characterization of the concept itself, Lewis's stance towards that concept, and the overall import of the concept for Lewis's work. Specifically, for McLuhan, the concept of nihilism refers to the devaluation of both external existence and the experience of the human self as empty and illusory, and this perception is fundamentally rooted in a set of theological presuppositions originating out of Gnosticism, Buddhism, and other religious traditions. In McLuhan's reading, this theological problematic and its nihilistic implications are cast as the orienting problematic of Lewis's work, with Lewis ambivalently oscillating between a strategy of inhabiting the logic of this tendency and criticizing it. While Weller likewise argues for the central importance of the concept in relation to Lewis's work, specifically as Lewis receives the concept from the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, Weller's characterization of the concept deemphasizes the theological dimensions of the concept to instead insist on its political character for Lewis. As Weller defines it, nihilism for Lewis refers to the interpenetration of aesthetics and politics and the negation of a principle of aesthetic autonomy, a negation which entails the loss of freedom for the intellect. Lastly, Nath departs from the two previous readings in his insistence that nihilism is not a central concept at all in Lewis's oeuvre, and in fact, it is not even primarily taken up as a concept. Preferring to characterize Lewis as an artist rather than philosopher, and insisting on the qualitative difference between the activity of artists and philosophers, Nath argues that Lewis's various references to nihilism should not be read as

substantive conceptual engagements but rather in terms of their aesthetic affect, and that these references should be framed as relatively minor in relation to Lewis's broader aesthetic strategy.

In his short article "Nihilism Exposed" (1955), Marshall McLuhan emphasizes the theological underpinnings of Lewis's engagement with the problematic of nihilism. For McLuhan, Lewis's nihilism is positioned as emerging out of the conjunction of Plotinian Gnosticism and modern processes of technicization, and is characterized by its experience of existence as an "an empty machine" and the illusory nature of the human self. Specifically, the neo-Platonic doctrine of pre-existence and the tripartite model of spirit, intellect, and sense are what inform Lewis's conception of nihilism, according to McLuhan (99). McLuhan frames Lewis's overall output as somewhat ambivalent in relation to this nihilism, with Lewis's essayistic and polemic works devoted to exposing the "anti-human nihilism emanating from modern philosophy and physics, as well as our everyday activities in commerce and social engineering in this century," while at the same time his aesthetic output is said to satirically inhabit and intensify the logic of this trajectory of thought so as to explore its most extreme implications (98). On the whole, McLuhan's methodological approach is to read Lewis's work, both his essays and literature, as reflective of certain basic theological presuppositions which must in turn be referred to in order to properly characterize Lewis's specific conception of nihilism.

In his article, McLuhan argues that Lewis's concept of nihilism is informed specifically by a "triadic view" of spirit, intellect, and sense. McLuhan characterizes this theological belief in a threefold division between spirit, intellect, and sense as both "neo-Platonic and Buddhist" in nature, adding later that it can also be understood as form of modern "gnosticism." McLuhan's somewhat loose comparison of what might ordinarily be taken as distinct religious traditions is

rooted in his suggestion that they all share a belief in the opacity of "intellectual knowledge" and "the illusory character of the human self" (97). This presupposition regarding the threefold division of spirit, intellect, and sense is said to further undergird the belief that there is no inherent "vitality" of the mind, the self, or nature, for by themselves they may as well be conglomerations of dead matter (97). According to this theological framework, McLuhan emphasizes that it is only spirit then that can "impregnate the world with some quality of reality," specifically as a divine spark which is realized and exerted through art. For Lewis, art is produced out of "the divine spark in man," with McLuhan emphasizing then that spirit is not to be conflated with the human self. McLuhan further connects the presupposition of this triadic split and the privileging of the aesthetic as the space of appearance of meaning to the Romantics and the Symbolists who, according to McLuhan, took art to be more real than the external world (97).

This triadic view, as McLuhan describes it, is positioned in contrast to a Catholic doctrine of body-soul, a dualistic rather than triadic division, which instead confers a substantiality on the world, or the "existent" (97). For in contrast to Catholic doctrine, Lewis's supposed Gnosticism is characterized by its adherence to a doctrine of pre-existence, which is the doctrine that "man imprisons an uncreated divine spark within his body and within his soul," a spirit which both precedes and succeeds the organic life of the body (97). Significantly, this divine spark is seen as radically different from the human sense of self, or as McLuhan puts it, the human self is no more identical with this divine spark than the same spark is identical "with a stick or a stone" (97). According to this doctrine then, the imagination of the artist, poet, or "genius" is said to emanate from the spirit, and thus the imagination is attributed not to the human self but to this "divine spark" which is only temporarily imprisoned within the wild body of the human (97).

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The vision and product of the artist or "genius" are thereby seen as more real than the rest of existence, because they are the product of this spirit (97). Accordingly, this belief leads to the notion that it is the task of the artist to "shift the scenery of existence" and subsequently the notion that art is the primary mode of revolution (98). According to McLuhan, in the Catholic tradition, the creative imagination is figured as an intellectual power belonging to humans, whereas in this triadic "neo-Platonic" tradition, following from the doctrine of pre-existence, the imagination is instead part of the "super-human emanation from 'spirit'" and realized through a "divine spark" in the human soul (98). As McLuhan puts it then, from this viewpoint, "The tragedy and comedy of the human condition are a result of the juxtaposition of this divine spark with matter, sense, and intellect—a familiar existentialist conception, necessarily involving the doctrine of pre-existence" (97). This neo-Platonic doctrine of the pre-existence of spirit thus imagines a divine power that is only temporarily imprisoned in the human body and which is qualitatively different from one's sense of self or one's faculties of thought (intellect).

According to McLuhan, Lewis's overall tragi-comic register should be seen then as revolving around this notion of the imprisoned spirit, "of spirit shackled to the dying animal or human body" (98). This notion of a forced juxtaposition of the spirit, the source of imagination and art, with the sensory and intellectual apparatus of human flesh is the source of Lewis's "grim comedy" for McLuhan (98). The human body as merely dead matter can be distinguished from a stone or a stick only in the sense that a pre-existent spirit is shackled inside of the body, although this spirit is qualitatively different and disjunct from human capacities and organs. With this devaluation of both sensory experience and intellectual thought, and with the veracity of human knowledge and the substantiality of one's sense of self likewise de-valued, a profoundly anti-

human perspective emerges wherein we are but marionettes made of flesh, playing at being alive. This is the perspective that constitutes Lewis's nihilism, according to McLuhan.

On the other hand, McLuhan argues that Lewis's pamphlets and polemical essays embodied a spirit of humanism which intended to expose this nihilism in Lewis's contemporaries, particularly his fellow modernist writers and the "Time philosophers" such as Bergson, Whitehead, and later Heidegger. Though McLuhan's reading seems somewhat inconsistent on this point, his overall suggestion is that Lewis's art and literature aimed to inhabit this nihilistic perspective and push it to its logical extremes, while at the same time his essays and pamphlets inhabit the opposite perspective, aiming to expose this nihilism in the work of his contemporaries. What emerges is a picture of Lewis which alternates between a Gnostic, neo-Platonic perspective that for McLuhan has culminated in modern nihilism and a Catholic humanist perspective which aims to critique the nihilism of this first perspective.

McLuhan's overall evidence for this interpretation of the problem is sparse and lacking in specific references. It is likely that in terms of Lewis's essays, McLuhan is referring primarily to Lewis's *The Wild Body* (1927), due to an explicit reference in that text to the doctrine of pre-existence, and due to Lewis's overall framing of that essay in terms of a body-mind distinction. McLuhan also somewhat superficially refers to *Time and Western Man* (1927), though Lewis's arguments from that text are not developed in any substantial way by McLuhan. For evidence of how these assumptions shape Lewis's aesthetic output, McLuhan instead turns primarily to Lewis's novels, specifically *Self-Condemned* (1954), *The Revenge for Love* (1937), and *Apes of God* (1930). According to McLuhan, what these novels share is an "annihilation pattern" wherein a path of spiritual metamorphosis is traced. Namely, the works try to expose the "hollowness of human hopes" and a refusal of the human condition in a quest of "soul-annihilation" as it is

gradually revealed that existence is "the ultimate sham" and a form of damnation (99). How McLuhan specifically distills this "annihilating pattern" from these texts is rather ambiguous and left undeveloped as well.

On the whole, McLuhan claims that Lewis's anti-human nihilism, characterized in terms of the dissociation of sensibility and the devaluation of intellectual knowledge and the substantiality of one's sense of self, marks precisely the worth of Lewis's work. For, in pushing this most extreme logical end point, his art and writing begin to make this perspective intelligible, exposing this "Plotinian angelism" which McLuhan claims is leading towards "the extinction of humanism and personality" (98). For McLuhan, Lewis's viewpoint is thus prescient in the context of modernity and its technicization of society, a tendency which according to McLuhan reflects the transmission of a "Plotinian world-culture" and its devaluation of the human "to the point where the human dimension is obliterated" (98). As he puts it, "the nihilist philosophies of neo-Platonism and gnosticism have come into their own" (99). This mode of nihilism, while having its origin in a simple theological presupposition, thus prefigures the technicization of the globe and the extinction of the human through a sort of cybernetic union of technology and theology, wherein "existence is an empty machine" (99). McLuhan's formulation thus suggests that this mode of nihilism is thought not just at the scale of a simple theological presupposition, but at a global scale wherein art and engineering converge in their will to abolish nature, human existence is devalued to a "mere illusion," and human polity is flattened into a "grimcrack mechanism" (99). McLuhan frames Lewis as a significant and contradictory writer for both trying to critique this nihilistic current of thought, especially as it came to manifest itself in twentieth-century time-philosophies and positivism and more generally in the technicization of society, while also inhabiting and reproducing the extremes of this logic within his own art

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and literature. Thus, according to McLuhan, while Lewis's output seems to respond to this anti-human nihilism and the dissociation of sensibility in contradictory ways, both styles of articulating the problem may be understood as grappling primarily with the problematic of nihilism in relation to certain theological undercurrents.

Shane Weller is a more recent critic likewise concerned with how concept of nihilism interacts with Lewis's thought, although his reading offers a substantially different interpretation of the problem. In his article "Nietzsche Among the Modernists: The Case of Wyndham Lewis" (2007), Weller focuses primarily on Lewis's theoretical works and essays rather than on his literary works in order to trace the relation between Nietzsche's and Lewis's thought. Arguing that in the context of English letters no writer was more decisively influenced by Nietzsche's thought than Wyndham Lewis, Weller suggests that Lewis's indebtedness to Nietzsche is most evident in his fixation on the concept of European nihilism, going so far as to claim that Lewis's "entire oeuvre is in fact nothing less than an unremitting critique of nihilism in one form or another" (634). Whereas McLuhan was more ambivalent in his characterization of Lewis's stance towards nihilism, suggesting the Lewis would alternate between nihilistic and anti-nihilistic modes of critique, Weller argues that Lewis's entire body of work should be read as devoted towards a critique of European nihilism. Further, in tracing the explicit discussions of the concept of nihilism in Lewis's work, Weller distills a conception of nihilism from Lewis's work which is characterized primarily as political rather than theological in orientation. That is, invoking a familiar modernist *topos*, the question of the proper relation between art and politics, Weller claims that for Lewis, "The very essence of modern European nihilism lies precisely in the politicization of art, the negation of art's autonomy from the political" (635). According to Weller then, referring here to Lewis's essay, "The Diabolical Principle" (1929), the essence of

European nihilism for Lewis lies in the relation between aesthetics and politics and the erosion of autonomy between these two spheres of activity. According to Weller's reading, "the politicization of art" is the most "nihilistic gesture of all" for Lewis, explicitly defining Lewis's conception of nihilism as "the negation of art's autonomy" (635-636). In this sense then, according to Weller's characterization of the problem, Lewis's conception of nihilism is thought of at the scale of a particular intellectual tradition which is European in orientation, rather than in relation to a global "age of technology," as McLuhan saw it (McLuhan 98).

Weller distinguishes between moral, theological, and political dimensions of the concept of nihilism, only to argue that in Lewis's case his conception of nihilism is always primarily political in orientation. That is, Weller explicitly rejects the idea that nihilism for Lewis refers essentially to a form of moral nihilism ("amorality or lack of compassion" (636)), and he further rejects the theological valence of the concept which McLuhan wished to emphasize, stating that nihilism, as Lewis conceives of it, is not "a spirit of negation directed against the Christian humanist conception of humanity" (636). Thus whereas McLuhan read Lewis's nihilism as emerging out of a particular "anti-human" theological tradition, Weller rejects this entire framework for understanding the problem as rooted in a question of Lewis's theological presuppositions to instead argue that nihilism for Lewis refers to the "contamination" of art and the intellect by the political. Further, whereas in McLuhan's tripartite model the human's sensory and intellectual apparatus are subordinate to the spirit, which is what confers a vitality onto the former, in Weller's more secularized framing of the problem the question of spirit is dropped entirely from this formation, and instead what is at stake is the freedom of the creative intellect and its "contamination" by the political (636).

While there is no doubt that Lewis wished to cling to a conception of aesthetic autonomy and lamented the tendency of certain modernists to infuse art with politics, Weller's characterization of Lewis's nihilism raises the question of why this tendency necessarily corresponds with the "essence" of nihilism. That is, could it not alternatively be the case that, for Lewis, this conflation of art and politics is more of a symptom of nihilism rather than what constitutes its essential character? Why does Weller insist that this negation of aesthetic autonomy constitutes the "essence" of nihilism for Lewis? In response to this question, Weller's reasoning is rather flimsy, writing only that "this is because modernity is for Lewis the 'political age,' while art remain (transhistorically) the purest form of expression for the intellect in its freedom" (636). Weller's suggestion seems to be that Lewis perceives the aesthetic as the space which allows for the transcendence of the intellect from immediate political ends and thus the negation of the aesthetic as an autonomous sphere forecloses the free development and transcendence of the intellect as it becomes subordinate to the political ends of the present, especially to the ends of the democratic masses of whom Lewis was generally suspicious. Notably, Weller is himself critical of this bifurcation, insisting on the necessary "imbrication" of the aesthetic, political, and philosophical. Nonetheless, he claims that for Lewis this negation of aesthetic autonomy is what constitutes the essence of nihilism for Lewis, and despite his caveat regarding the "imbrication" of the concept, Weller's recognition of the concept's imbrication still neglects to recognize the concept's theological dimension.

Turning to Lewis's later works, Weller acknowledges that in *The Writer and the Absolute* (1952) Lewis arrived at an alternative understanding of nihilism (638). In this case, Weller claims that Lewis's second conception of nihilism is ontological in nature, referring to philosophies which take "the ultimate ground to be the nothing (le néant) (638). In this book,

Lewis critiques the existentialism of both Sartre and Heidegger, casting their thought as nihilistic in character, claiming that existentialism is an attack on human reason insofar as it supplants reason and intellect with the will, transforming man into an "'acting animal'" rather than a "'thinking animal'" (638). In turn, this signals a withdrawal into subjectivity as one cuts oneself off from the world, foreclosing the realization of one's freedom. However, Weller acknowledges this only to then argue that this second characterization of nihilism is still subordinate to Lewis's first conception of nihilism as the negation of aesthetic autonomy. As he writes. "The more general argument of *The Writer and the Absolute* is precisely that art must remain free, and that for all of its token emphasis upon freedom, existentialism is a philosophy that conceives of the human as anything but free" (639). What is at stake then in Lewis's critique of nihilism, according to Weller, is the freedom of the intellect, a freedom which Lewis seeks to preserve through a principle of aesthetic autonomy. Despite acknowledging different articulations of the problem within Lewis's body of work, Weller insists that in all cases these articulations are subordinate to the primary question of the proper relation between aesthetics and politics, while also deemphasizing any of the theological aspects of Lewis's position.

Whereas McLuhan and Weller agree that the concept of nihilism is of central importance to Lewis's thought, despite characterizing that concept in different terms, Michael Nath's framing of the problem is different from these two previous critics in that he wishes instead to argue that Lewis never really deployed the "concept" of nihilism in any sort of substantive or sustained manner and that claims concerning the centrality of the concept exaggerate the issue. Responding directly to Weller's article, Nath's "'By Curious Sovereignty of Art': Wyndham Lewis and Nihilism" (2011) instead aims to deemphasize the influence of Nietzsche, and specifically his concept of nihilism, on Lewis's thought. Whereas Weller had stressed the

decisive nature of Nietzsche's thought on Lewis, going so far as to claim that no other writer "within the ambit of English literature" from the first half of the twentieth century had been more influenced by him, Nath suggests that the intellectual constellations Weller proposes are tendentious at best (3). Nath's characterization of the problem is grounded in the belief that readings of Lewis which privilege the conceptual are mistaken, because Lewis, as an artist, was not in the first place a conceptual thinker, and even when he tried to be his thought was often incoherent or "'inchoate'" (3). As Nath writes, he is not convinced that "a philosophically-led interpretation is apt," and therefore a reading which privileges the importance of the concept of nihilism is mistaken (4).

Nath's primary objection then is to insist that Lewis was first and foremost an artist, thus he questions the extent to which concepts of any sort are the principle issue for Lewis. Nath suggests that concepts that occur to philosophers do not occur in the same way for artists, and that there is a "constitutive difference of interest" between the artist and philosopher (4). What Nath objects to primarily then is Weller's methodological approach, which is to read Lewis's work as organized around a philosophical concept, and to then posit his artistic production as a secondary reflection of this. Despite recognizing Lewis's ambivalence towards the concept of nihilism, McLuhan similarly characterizes Lewis's oeuvre as centrally oriented around a philosophical problem, with the addition that the problem is said to be informed by a theological tradition and its presuppositions. Nath instead objects to these characterizations of nihilism in Lewis's work because, as he sees it, what primarily determines or orients the artist's output is style and its aesthetic affect, rather than conceptual analysis.

Choosing to read Lewis in this way, Nath disregards many of Lewis's theoretical texts as incoherent and instead focuses primarily on Lewis's literary output for his evidence. For

instance, referring to Lewis's *Tarr* (1928), Nath both acknowledges the references in the novel to

Nietzsche and a kind of Nietzschean concept of nihilism while at the same time arguing that the

invocations of both the philosopher and the philosophical concepts associated with him are not

themselves conceptual in nature, but rather part of a broader aesthetic strategy. That is, when

characters discuss Nietzsche in the text, it is in the form of a superficial chatter which aims to

offer a glimpse into the atmosphere of café culture at the time, not as a serious conceptual

engagement with Nietzsche's though (4). Thus, whereas McLuhan argued that Lewis's

engagement with the concept of nihilism is informed by certain anti-human theological tradition,

positing that nihilism for Lewis is thought of at the scale of a technological world culture, for

Nath nihilism is demoted to the rather minimal scale of stylistic ambience, claiming Lewis's

references are meant only to serve as a literary gloss on what might have been seen as a

fashionable café or salon topic of discussion. Lastly there can be no real "conceptual

indebtedness" to Nietzsche, Nath ultimately insists, because conceptually speaking the novel is

not coherent (4).

In terms of Lewis's theoretical works and his references to nihilism there, Nath likewise

insists that these references are not sustained or developed enough, arguing that the stress Weller

puts on Nietzsche's influence is unwarranted and, by extension, nihilism is not really a serious

concern for Lewis (13). For instance, whereas Weller interprets certain passages from Lewis's

autobiography *Rude Assignment* (1950) that explicitly discuss the nihilism of *Tarr*'s Krieger as

evidence of Nietzsche's decisive influence on Lewis, Nath instead interprets these same

references as "connoisseurly and reminiscent" rather than any kind of conceptual engagement

with Nietzsche's thought (7). Instead, Nath refers to separate passages of *Rude Assignment* as

well as Lewis's *The Lion and the Fox* (1927) to insist on the primary influence of Shakespeare,

rather than Nietzsche, on Lewis's thought, and this is taken as further evidence that Lewis was not concerned with the issue of nihilism in any serious way. In Nath's reading of *The Lion and The Fox*, he places emphasis on Lewis's discussion of the "colossi" or great men of Shakespeare's tragedies, claiming that Lewis is instead primarily concerned with the eternal and how to make things last through artistic production (10). That is, coinciding with Lewis's fascination with statuary and sculpture as an art form, Nath stresses that Lewis's primarily concern is "eternity" and how to commemorate what has lived.

Lastly, Nath similarly deemphasizes the theme of nihilism when turning to a discussion of *The Wild Body*, a text that McLuhan was likely referring to for his reading and which Weller explicitly references as well. Whereas McLuhan had likely been referring to *The Wild Body* as evidence of how Lewis's theological presuppositions inform his theory of nihilism, and whereas Weller reads the text as an articulation of a nihilistic theory of comedy and its relation to the absurd, Nath instead interprets the same essay as a celebration and expression of wonder at the phenomena of laughter, dismissing the nihilistic valence that the other two writers interpreted into the passage. This supposed celebration of "an artist's sense of wonder" at the phenomena of laughter in *The Wild Body* leads Nath to conclude that this text is hardly a document of nihilism, instead claiming that, temperamentally, it signals "the reverse of nihilism" (17).

In summary, McLuhan and Weller both agree then that nihilism should be understood as a central concept that Lewis was engaged with, claiming his theoretical and aesthetic output are directly informed by this engagement, whereas Nath disagrees with this characterization and wishes instead to deemphasize the significant of the concept of nihilism for Lewis's work. McLuhan's approach to the question of the status of nihilism in Lewis's work is to ground his characterization of the problem in what he takes to be Lewis's theological presuppositions,

whereas Weller by contrast elides this theological dimension entirely to instead insist that the issue at hand is the relation between politics and aesthetics. In McLuhan's case, he claims Lewis's concept of nihilism is rooted in two theological presuppositions: First, a belief in a tripartite model of spirit, sense, and intellect, with the latter two categories being qualitatively different and disjunct from the former; Second, a belief in a doctrine of the pre-existence of the spirit, which in turn devalues corporeal life. For McLuhan, nihilism is thus experienced as the devaluation of sensory experience, the capacity for human knowledge, and the insubstantiality of one's sense of self, and these devaluations are characterized at the scale of a world-historical problem. Weller's more secularized approach to the question, the essence of nihilism consists of the interpenetration of aesthetics and politics, as this conflation is said to foreclose the free development of the intellect as it becomes subordinate to the political, with intellect being subordinated to will and, in the case of democracy, to the will of the many. There is thus no longer a "triadic" structure between sense, intellect and spirit in Weller's analysis, with Weller ignoring the question of spirit entirely and retaining only a tension between intellect and will. Further, for Weller, the issue is no longer world-historical in scale but rather refers to a particular intellectual tradition which is mainly European in scale and, at least given Weller's preferred intellectual constellations that he draws from in his essay (Nietzsche and Heidegger), primarily German. Lastly, Nath argues that Lewis's mentions of nihilism are conceptually superficial and instead are designed to invoke a sort of aesthetic affect or signal a connoisseurly ethos in the case of his autobiographical writing. For Nath, Lewis's texts are temperamentally the reverse of nihilism, for they are instead characterized primarily by their interest in artistic production, the eternal, and a pathos of wonderment. In this case nihilism is construed at the scale of mere trend, a fashionable idea which Lewis superficially glosses in disparate situations for aesthetic or

rhetorical affect, rather than constituting a genuine problem which orients his work in any significant way.

2.3   Lewis's Concept of Nihilism: Continuities and Discontinuities

This section traces the various deployments of the concept of nihilism in Lewis's work, focusing especially on Lewis's essays and polemical writings. Beginning in 1927 with Lewis's *The Lion and the Fox*, Lewis made reoccurring references to nihilism in his theoretical works, with *The Wild Body, Time and Western Man*, "The Diabolical Principle," and *The Writer and the Absolute* all referring to the concept to varying degrees. While Lewis also wrote many fictional works, and indeed nihilistic characters may appear in some of those texts, I focus on his essayistic works in this chapter for several reasons: First, I focus on Lewis's theoretical essays to challenge Nath's claim that Lewis's engagement with nihilism is not conceptual and instead only aesthetic, to instead distill multiple explicit references and instances of conceptual engagement on Lewis's part. Second, while McLuhan acknowledges Lewis's engagement with nihilism in his theoretical works, the specific evidence he provides for his reading still draws only from Lewis's literature and their "annihilating pattern." Thus by turning to a different set of texts as evidence, I am able to nuance McLuhan's characterization of Lewis's concept of nihilism. Third, it is worth considering how the essay as form relates to Lewis's interpretation of the problematic of nihilism. As I show, Lewis echoes some ideas from Montaigne concerning the limits of human action and knowledge and the disjunction between discursive reason and the world. I claim then that the essay as a more experimental and fragmentary form of conceptual writing better corresponds to this interpretation of human limits over philosophical discourse, insofar as philosophy traditionally aims towards systematic totality and is built on certain Cartesian

presuppositions, such as the ideal of indubitable certainty and the equation of human conceptual schemata with the structure of being (Adorno 14-15). Lastly, in focusing on Lewis's essays I show that, in addition to the literature and correspondence that was analyzed in Chapter 1, the modernist essay was also a site of engagement with the problematic of nihilism. By examining Lewis's references to nihilism and their intellectual background in these essays, I show that there are multiple iterations of the concept in Lewis's work, although these iterations are each articulated in response to a shared problematic involving the tension between action and thought.

Finally, in this section I show that, for Lewis, the specific tension between action and thought which informs his concept of nihilism is genealogically rooted in the early modern period, with Lewis discussing figures such as Shakespeare, Montaigne, Machiavelli, and Luther in relation to his conception of nihilism. Overall then, this suggests a narrower scale of nihilism when compared to Conrad, who gestured towards a form of cosmic nihilism, while at the same time broadening Weller's characterization of Lewis's nihilism as principally Nietzschean, as well as Weller's more general claim that modernist nihilism is largely a response to a modernity beginning with the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Lewis instead attributes the first sense of the concept of nihilism to Shakespeare, characterizing Shakespeare's nihilism as a representational approach which maintains an image of the fragility of human existence and the weakness of the human will in relation to a dynamic of tragic failure. Conversely, the nihilism of the time-cult which Lewis attacks in *Time and Western Man* is characterized by an overinvestment in human agency and notions of historical progress, with Lewis claiming that the humanist optimism and fetishization of action which characterize these positions in fact masks certain nihilistic contradictions. In his 1929 essay "The Diabolical Principle," Lewis then directs this critique towards the "romantic nihilists" of the transnational modernist journal *Transition,*

whose nihilism is spiritually continuous with the nihilism of the time-cult while being more characterized by their fixation on destruction, their distaste for civilization, and their obsession with the concept of revolt. Lastly, in *The Writer and the Absolute*, one of Lewis's late texts, Lewis critiques the existentialism of Sartre as essentially a passé revival and amalgamation of these various forms of nihilism, insofar as Sartre over-romanticizes the human capacity for action, supplants the intellect for intuition, and emphasizes the immediately sensible and the concrete as the place of reality over and against the reality of an external absolute.

While Lewis is not on the whole an explicitly religious thinker, he did strongly sympathize with the Catholic intellectual tradition, and thus I stress in my analysis, contra Weller's reading, that it is necessary to recognize this religious dimension of Lewis's thought in order to properly characterize his references to nihilism. For the nihilism which Lewis critiques in *Time and Western Man*, "The Diabolical Principle," and other texts is, according to his analysis, partially rooted in the early modern divergence between Catholic and Protestant traditions of thought. Further, Lewis expresses skepticism towards the supposed atheism of Sartre's existentialism, arguing that his primary ideas and overall pathos are predicated on a Christian tradition of thought. For these reasons I claim then that Lewis's concept of nihilism is early modern in origin, European in scale, and at least partially theological in type.

2.3.1   *The Lion and the Fox: Tragedy and Shakespeare's Nihilism*

While Nath's reading insisted on the influence of Shakespeare rather than Nietzsche on Lewis's thought as way of deemphasizing the significance of nihilism in Lewis's work, with Nath referring primarily to Lewis's *The Lion and the Fox* as evidence of this influence, it is curious that he neglects to attend to a section from that very work which is dedicated to the

question of Shakespeare's nihilism. That is, in his 1927 study of Shakespeare, Lewis explicitly invokes the concept of nihilism in relation to Shakespeare's works, with a short chapter of the book entitled "Shakespeare's Nihilism" dedicated to the topic. Lewis's text is in part a polemic directed against two types of critical approaches, namely those which have cast Shakespeare as a ruthless Machiavellian, and those which have argued his works point towards a form of Christian optimism, with Lewis instead attributing a special form of nihilism to Shakespeare's tragedies as a way of distinguishing Shakespeare from these two types of readings. In this text, Shakespeare's nihilism involves two aspects: First, for Lewis, it refers to a mode of aesthetic representation characterized by its moral indifference, and second, it is characterized by a skepticism of action and the possibilities for human agency, expressed through a dynamic of tragic failure. As Lewis discusses it, Shakespeare's nihilism can be distinguished from alternative characterizations of nihilism which Lewis would later attribute to many of his intellectual enemies, insofar as it stages a critique of action-oriented philosophy rather than romanticizes it, and thus is cast as more passive in orientation. Shakespeare's nihilism is thus for Lewis not a form of "active" nihilism, but rather non-active and intellectual in nature, marking the first distinct iteration of the concept in Lewis's theoretical works.

In the first place, Lewis situates Shakespeare's tragedies in relation to a certain trajectory of modern philosophy concerned primarily with the exoneration of human agency and action. For Lewis, the chief representative of this modern, actionist strain of philosophy is Machiavelli, a "pessimistic theoretician" who, along with Nietzsche, sought to develop a philosophy of action over and against a philosophy of passive contemplation. As he writes, "All of the great characteristics of Machiavelli's, as of Nietzsche's, thought are traceable to a passion for action," with these philosophies being grounded on what Lewis calls "the agent principle," the

privileging of human action over pure thought or contemplation and a viewpoint oriented by the basic presupposition that humans can entirely determine their own ends and outcomes (159).[5] Lewis's study of Shakespeare is, among other things, an occasion for the expression of his own skepticism towards these philosophies of action, with his readings of Shakespeare's works serving to stage a polemic directed against the action-oriented philosophies of Machiavelli and Nietzsche. Lewis approvingly cites a definition of action offered by the critic A.C. Bradley, who defined action as "the translation of thought into reality" (qtd. in Lewis 166). As such, Lewis's chief criticism of these action-oriented philosophies is the failure to fully account for the possibility and what he sees as the rather high likelihood of mistranslations, with Lewis suggesting that there is a necessary disjunction between thought and action which is occasioned through this translation of thought into reality. This is because, while thought may belong to us as "ours," actions are always at risk of being overdetermined by some overriding and inhuman principle or force. For instance, in tragedy, fate commonly acts as an overdetermining force which subverts the intended ends of humans, in religion this overdetermination is enacted by the gods, and for Machiavelli specifically, this overdetermining principle is formulated in terms of *fortuna*.

On the one hand, Lewis's polemical characterization of Machiavelli as a purely action-oriented philosophy here neglects to fully attend to Machiavelli's own ambivalence towards the possibilities of action and agency. After all, as Machiavelli himself wrote, "…our fortune is the arbiter of half the things that we do, leaving the other half or so to be controlled by ourselves," suggesting that he acknowledged that human ends cannot be purely shaped through the human will and that there are limits to human agency (Machiavelli 79). On the other hand, Machiavelli's

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[5] In *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926), Lewis similarly characterized Nietzsche's thought, saying that he is part of the "*Will school*" of philosophy and that Nietzsche's philosophy is really a "*will to action*" (117).

radical suggestion at the time was that despite these overdetermining forces which subvert human ends and impose certain limits on human agency, roughly half of our actions, or at least the actions of a prince or republic, may be self-determined. In turn, this would allow for the possible development of a political science which was largely indifferent to questions of moral right and which instead would be concerned primarily with the preservation and enhancement of power, a science to be distilled through a careful analysis of political actions and decisions made in both the past and present. Lewis's aversion to the "agent principle," which according to this account was presupposed by Machiavelli and absorbed to varying degrees by subsequent strains of modern philosophy, is thus directed towards the dimension of human agency and the possibilities for human political action which Machiavelli aimed to carve out. Accordingly, Lewis characterizes Machiavelli as a philosopher "attached blindly to *action"* (159).

In opposition to this viewpoint, Lewis approvingly mentions an alternative early modern philosophy characterized instead by skepticism, contemplation, or non-action, which Lewis suggests can be found in Montaigne's *Essays* as well as Shakespeare's tragedies (160). While he suggests an opposition between the philosophies of Machiavelli and Montaigne then, Lewis's reference to Montaigne is left largely undeveloped in the text aside from these broad characterizations of Machiavelli as a philosopher of thought over action. It is worth highlighting a few aspects of Montaigne's thought then, which Lewis is likely glossing in his text on Shakespeare, so as to provide greater context for the polemic that Lewis tries to stage with his analysis of Shakespeare's nihilism.

In one of his most well-known essays, "An Apology for Raymond Sebond" (1580), Montaigne is himself at perhaps his most polemical as he writes in favor of his Catholic beliefs against what he sees as the rise of atheistic individualism in order to articulate a theory of

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Christian skepticism. For Montaigne, this atheism was in part unleashed by Lutheranism, which he characterizes as a "new disease" that risks degenerating into atheism because of its privileging of "individual assent," the introduction of doubt and uncertainty as it relates to religious principles, and its undermining of church authority (Montaigne 490). As will be seen later on, Lewis himself attributed all of these qualities to Protestantism, casting Luther as one of the progenitors of European nihilism in a gesture which echoes Montaigne's essay.

Montaigne's essay emphasizes the limits and fragility of man's power and agency in the world, describing the aim of his essay as such: "So long as Man thinks he has means and powers deriving from himself he will never acknowledge what he owes to his Master…So we must strip him down to his shirt-tails" (546). Montaigne seeks then to disclose the "emptiness" and "nothingness of Man" in relation to a Divine will (501). He does this first by arguing that truth derives from revelation rather than discursive reason, and thus man's ability to gain knowledge of the universe is severely limited (501). In addition to the limits of human knowledge, Montaigne places limits on human action. If God is omnipotent and the ultimate cause, as Montaigne sees it, then even great men of action, like kings or princes, are cast as weak and ineffectual in relation to the divine will which circumscribes human existence, with Montaigne in turn finding a kind of humor in the pathetic nature of men aspiring to shape the universe through their individual will. As he writes: "It is not possible to imagine anything more laughable that this pitiful, wretched creature—who is not even master of himself, but exposed to shocks on ever side—should call himself Master and Emperor of a universe, the smallest particle of which he has no means of knowing, let alone swaying!" (502). The one freedom which Montaigne affords humans, and which distinguishes them from other animals, is the freedom to think, but even this is an ambivalent freedom for Montaigne, insofar as the limits of human knowledge suggested by

Montaigne means that humans can, at best, only come to understand their weakness, while at the same time, this freedom means they also can be led into error and subsequently into a state of confusion and despair (514).

In *The Lion and the Fox*, Lewis invokes ideas similar to those expressed in Montaigne's essay when he contrasts Shakespeare with the philosophers of action by claiming that Shakespeare's works should be read as "a criticism of action and of the agent-principle" (160). For Lewis, the figure of Hamlet, which he likens to a hero of "non-action," is the most explicit expression of what Lewis takes to be Shakespeare's skepticism of action (160, 170). Yet at the same time, accordingly to Lewis, Shakespeare was a great depicter of action, particularly of the violent action of kings and their Machiavellian politics. However, Lewis suggests that this focus on action is not meant to be interpreted as prescriptive on Shakespeare's part. To support his claim that Shakespeare should be distinguished from a Machiavellian philosophy of action, Lewis places special emphasis on what he calls the "tragic fact" of Shakespeare's tragedies, referring here to the disjunction between thought and action whereby thoughts are translated into reality through action and, in the process, a mistranslation occurs which then leads to varying degrees of failure. For Lewis, Shakespeare's tragedies revolve around this fact of tragic failure so as to instead disclose, like Montaigne, the weakness and limits of human agency. For this reason, Shakespeare's depictions of great men of action are meant to be taken as more descriptive in nature, insofar as their attempts and failure to actualize an action-oriented philosophy reveal the limits and follies of a Machiavellian styled actionist philosophy. As Lewis writes, "Tragedy, on the other hand, tells of nothing but *downfall*, and the powerlessness of men," instead confirming the power of an inhuman, "supernatural" power either in the form of God or fate (169). Lewis's view then is that Shakespeare must have had "the poorest opinion both of action and the actors

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that he spent his life writing about" (161). For Lewis this disjunction between thought and action is the basis of Shakespeare's tragedies, and it is in this context that Lewis then specifically raises the question of Shakespeare's nihilism.

While the question of Shakespeare's nihilism is framed in terms of the contrast between Machiavelli as a philosopher of action or Montaigne as a philosopher of skepticism and non-action, it is also in contrast to readings by the Christian critics Morgan and A.C. Bradley who try to attribute morally uplifting messages of Christian optimism to Shakespeare's tragedies. Despite framing Shakespeare as a skeptic of Machiavelli's philosophy of action, Lewis admits to a certain affinity between the ruthlessness of Shakespeare's depictions and the amorality of Machiavelli's "academy of manslaughter" in order to undermine the moralistic readings performed by critics like Morgan and Bradley. As Lewis writes, for Shakespeare, "the working of the puritan conscience at the spectacle of the borgianism is not exhibited by him" (177-178). For Lewis then, this willingness on Shakespeare's part to depict human conduct with a coldness and moral indifference—an attribute which he shares with Machiavelli—is what marks the first aspect of Shakespeare's nihilism. Neither delighted nor horrified by the ruthlessness which is depicted, Shakespeare's equanimous treatment of political melodrama suggests that he was not especially concerned with appealing to the moral expectations of the gods or the populace, or as Lewis puts it, his works are "neither religious or democratic, in any dogmatic sense" (177-178). For Lewis, Shakespeare was conscious of the fact that he was not a servant of a god, "nor is he a nihilist without knowing it" (179). Shakespeare's self- aware nihilism in this first case then refers to what Lewis sees as the representational coldness of Shakespeare's works, which in Lewis's view are neither didactic nor overwrought in their depiction of murder, treachery, and tragic failure. Insofar as Shakespeare's tragedies are not subordinate to particular religious or political

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ends, Lewis approves of this aspect of Shakespeare's nihilism for its ability to sustain a form of aesthetic autonomy.

However, wary that Shakespeare's nihilism will be "mistranslated" by his readers, namely as the simple aestheticization of Machiavellian *realpolitik*, Lewis suggests that Shakespeare's nihilism is manifold in character and consists of more than just this tone of moral indifference. Here Lewis once more aligns Shakespeare specifically with Montaigne, over and against Machiavelli, in order to reiterate Shakespeare's skepticism of agency and action. That is, despite the representational coldness and moral indifference that Lewis attributes to Shakespeare's plays, his nihilism cannot be reduced to a Machiavellian philosophy of action and raw power either. As Lewis writes, Shakespeare's works in their coldness aim instead to represent an "explicit processes of the intellect which would furnish Montaigne with the natural material for his essays," distancing Shakespeare's nihilism from an active form of nihilism which aims only towards the preservation and enhancement of power (179). Rather, according to Lewis, Shakespeare's works attempt to trace the processes of the human intellect in its disjointedness from the wild body and the body's subjection to superordinate, overdetermining forces beyond one's control.

Lewis evidences this last point and his overall characterization of Shakespeare's nihilism by turning to a reading of the ending of *Lear*. Whereas the Christian critic A.C. Bradley interprets the seemingly pessimistic ending of Lear and the figure of Cordelia's corpse to be an ironic sign which by way of contradiction points towards a redemptive attitude of Christian optimism, Lewis rejects this particular theological reading of the scene to instead suggest that, corresponding with aesthetic principle of moral indifference practiced by Shakespeare, what is represented "cannot be anything but what it forces us at once to see it as: an expression of the poet's mockery of

human supplications, and notion of benevolent powers, of whom we are the cherished children"
(179). For Lewis then, Shakespeare's representational coldness allows him to depict a moment of
"ugly despair" which exists singularly and apart from a redemptive moral framework. In the
same stroke, this depiction is consistent with the rejection of a principle of agency which Lewis
aligns with Machiavellianism but which is also implicit in religious concepts of supplication or
sacrifice, insofar as the scene discloses the failure to willfully appease the gods as a method for
affecting certain recuperative outcomes. In a peculiar sense Shakespeare's nihilism is, for Lewis,
of a higher order then, insofar as it both captures the moral indifference of Machiavellianism
while at the same time undermining the possibilities for action which the indifference is
supposed to unlock, disclosing instead through the moment of tragic failure the facticity of
irrevocable despair and the weakness of the human will as it fails to affect both its temporal and
spiritual ends. Suggesting that Shakespeare's nihilism then is more passive in orientation,
Lewis's reading does not reject theology as such then but rather involves the rejection of a
particular theological framework wherein the benevolence of the gods can be both known and
directly appealed to, instead arguing for an impersonal philosophy of non-action and thought
aimed towards the disclosure of human weakness and the reality of tragic failure. Further, for
Lewis, Shakespeare's nihilism maintains a distinction between thought and aesthetic
representation, on the one hand, and political ends, on the other, a distinction which Lewis
returns to in his later essays when he writes in favor of a principle of aesthetic autonomy. On the
whole then, this first iteration of Lewis's concept of nihilism is rooted in a question of limits of
thought and action, a question which Lewis genealogically situates in relation to the early
modern constellation of Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne.

2.3.2   The Wild Body: On Comedy and Its Relation to the Absurd

Published in 1928, Lewis's anthology of short stories, *The Wild Body,* concludes with several essays which attempt to elaborate a theory of comedy, and to explain how this theory of comedy informs Lewis's own approach to writing satire. Lewis's theory of comedy is grounded on a dynamic which runs parallel to his reading of Shakespeare's tragedy, insofar as it is rooted in the idea of a disjunction between thought and action, which to recall, was critical for Lewis's characterization of Shakespeare's nihilism. In *The Wild Body*, Lewis admits to presupposing a separation of mind and body in his work, with this separation constituting a point of tension and possible failure. Lewis thus grounds both his theory of tragedy and comedy on a specific formulation of the mind-body relationship, and this in turn informs his skepticism of action more generally. In elaborating on this theory of comedy, Lewis does not explicitly mention nihilism, instead turning his attention to the concept of humor and its relation to the absurd. This articulation is important for understanding Lewis's notion of nihilism and its developments, however, because it lends further context to the dynamic which previously characterized Shakespeare's nihilism, it anticipates what Lewis sees as Sartre's nihilism in *The Writer and the Absolute*, and because it complicates both McLuhan's and Nath's characterization of Lewis's nihilism.

In "The Meaning of the Wild Body," the second essay contained in his book, Lewis introduces what he takes to be the condition of possibility for comedy and, by extension, for his theory of tragedy as it came to be associated with Shakespeare's nihilism. Lewis begins the essay by freely admitting that his theory of comedy is grounded on the presupposed dichotomy of mind and body. As he writes when introducing his concept of the wild body: "To assume the dichotomy of mind and body is necessary here, without arguing it; for it is upon this essential

separation that the theory of laughter here proposed is based" (244). Notably, Lewis's essay and this opening claim are prefaced by an epigraph from the *Vedânta-Sútras*, a collection of aphorisms and one of three traditional sources of the Vedanta school of Hindu philosophy along with the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads* (Lochtefeld 746). The latter text had entered into European circulation through the translations of Anquetil Duperron (1723-1805) and notably was a favorite reading and point of reference for the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, a thinker whom Lewis read and even refers to in his essay (Clark 57; Lewis 246). Lewis's opening epigraph from the *Vedânta-Sútras* asserts a distinction between the body, "which is itself non-intelligent," and the soul, which is the "abode of an intelligent principle" (qtd. in Lewis 244). After foregrounding his essay with this source, Lewis then similarly insists on a dualistic split between the body and soul, referring to the "Upanisadic" idea that the body is only a temporary vessel to which the soul is "momentarily attached" through a process of reincarnation (244-245). Lewis thus introduces his theory of comedy by way of this opening reference to Vedic religious thought, suggesting that the phenomenon of laughter is predicated on a similar distinction between the body and mind (244).

Though McLuhan's textual evidence was decidedly sparse when it came to his theological characterization of Lewis's nihilism, his rather underdeveloped characterization of Lewis's thought as partially Buddhistic is likely a reference to this particular essay, considering its references to a doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul and reincarnation. McLuhan's questionable conflation of Hinduism and Buddhism aside, it should be noted that, when reading Lewis's essay closely, what Lewis stresses with these references in their symbolic and illustrative value rather than the literal truth of their claims, and thus if McLuhan's conclusions concerning Lewis's theological commitments are extrapolated from these references alone, such conclusions

should be seen as speculative at best. As Lewis writes: "to take the symbolic Vedic figure of the two birds, the one watching and passive, the other enjoying its activity, we similarly have to postulate *two* creatures, one that never enters into life, but that travels about in a vessel to whose destiny is momentarily attached" (244). In this reference to Vedic thought, Lewis stresses the *symbolic* value of the image of the two birds as a figure for illustrating the distinction between a principle of action, which is the province of the body, and passivity, which is the province of the contemplative mind or intellect. The symbolic distinction of the figure of the two birds which Lewis highlights is useful as an image for Lewis, then, both because it illustrates the qualitative difference he wishes to assert between body and mind, and because it parallels the type of opposition previously developed in his analysis of Shakespeare's nihilism between the will school of philosophy associated with Machiavelli and Nietzsche versus a passive philosophy of contemplation which Lewis had associated with Montaigne. While Lewis is no doubt referring to Vedic texts and spirituality to thematically foreground his theory of comedy, it is too strong of claim to say that Lewis's thought is Buddhistic in quality here based on these reference alone, for as Lewis explicitly states himself, these references are being interpreted symbolically so as to provide an image for illustrating the idea of a mind and body distinction as well as to recall the thematic tension between action and contemplation which Lewis is fixated on, rather than to signal Lewis's literal subscription to this system of belief.

Following from his opening discussion of this mind-body distinction, Lewis then speculates that the phenomena of laughter must emanate from this disjunction between body and mind, paralleling the distinction between action and thought that Lewis thematized in his work on Shakespeare's tragedy and which he saw as core to understanding Shakespeare's nihilism. For, according to Lewis, humor fundamentally involves the observation of a *thing,* that is the

body, pretending to be alive through its movements and actions, and which to a certain degree remains disjunct from the mind. That is, comedy for Lewis is grounded on a conception of failure which is occasioned by this disjunction between body and mind and the coinciding failure of the body to come alive, just as tragedy for Lewis consisted of the failure to fully translate thought into reality. As McLuhan suggested in his reading, this definition of comedy is built on an inversion of Bergson's theory of comedy, which believed that comedy consists of a person behaving as if he were a thing (McLuhan 98). Instead, as Lewis argues, all men are necessarily comic for they "are all things, or physical bodies, behaving as persons" (247).

This reversal of Bergson's theory is further signaled in Lewis's first essay in *The Wild Body*, entitled "Inferior Religions," wherein the body and its actions are described as overdetermined by external factors, precluded from achieving the kind of freedom and vitality which Lewis instead attributes to the intellect. In the essay, there is an impersonal and machinic quality which Lewis assigns to the characters of his stories, with Lewis referring to the characters of his short stories as his puppets, or as "creaking men machines" (233). As Lewis sees it, from an external perspective, the characters he portrays are not living but rather like automata, fanatical machines which abide by a "rhythmic scheme," their movement through the world directed by a predetermined pattern of interaction (235). As he writes of his characters, "they are only shadows of energy, not living beings. Their mechanism is a logical structure and they are nothing but that" with Lewis insisting on the unfreedom of the body and its capacity for action beyond this predetermined scheme (236). Lewis conceives of his characters and their bodies then as dead vessels caught up in the motion of pretending to be alive, with Lewis seeking to crystallize in this image of automata and marionettes the failure of these shadows of energy to achieve the freedom which belongs only to the intellect, a failure which is indexed in turn

through the event of laughter. Laughter for Lewis then is the mark of those experiences which reflexively evoke an experience of detachment, whereby this disjunction between body and mind and the failure of the body to achieve this freedom is momentarily recognized (249).

The continuity between Lewis's theories of tragedy and comedy can be further seen when he offers up a catalogue of the attributes of laughter, a phenomenon which is of particular interest to Lewis because it seems to index the friction between the mind as a place of self-conscious thought and the body as a mechanism subordinate to ritualized actions. For instance, one attribute of laughter is that it signals "the climax in the tragedy of seeing, hearing, and smelling self-consciously," with Lewis suggesting here that laughter signals a moment of self-conscious recognition of the tragic disjunction between thought and action, or between body and mind (237). Another attribute of laughter, he writes, is that it is "the representative of tragedy, when tragedy is away," suggesting further that Lewis's theory of comedy and the phenomena of laughter are rooted in a similar problem as Shakespeare's nihilism, the fact of tragic failure occasioned through the discontinuity of thought and action (238). Further, for Lewis, laughter marks a kind of physical effervescence of thought in the moments that it comes up against the material constraints of the body and its subordination to an overdetermining force such as fate, with Lewis writing that laughter is "all that remain physical in the flash of thought, its friction: or it may be a defiance flung at the hurrying fates" (239).

These ideas once more echo Montaigne, who argued that, given the fragility and ephemerality of the body, the root of humor might reside in the failure of human creatures to transcend their condition through the strength of their individual will. As Montaigne writes, "It is not possible to imagine anything more laughable that this pitiful, wretched creature—who is not even master of himself, but exposed to shocks on ever side—should call himself Master and

Emperor of a universe, the smallest particle of which he has no means of knowing, let alone swaying!" (502). For Montaigne then, the extremes of humor are marked by the human's hubristic belief that he can completely determine his own ends given the inherent frailty of human existence, which cannot even sway the "smallest particle." Likewise, Lewis's theory of comedy is grounded on the image of the human body as a kind of dead puppet or marionette which is entangled in the machinic currents of existence while only playing at being alive. Lewis's theory of comedy and laughter is thus grounded on a similar premise as his theory of tragedy, as it was articulated in relation to Shakespeare's nihilism: The friction between the mind as the seat of thought and the body as a vehicle of action, with both tragedy and comedy for Lewis being characterized in terms of a failure to unify these two aspects of human existence.

Given this elaboration of Lewis's theory of comedy, Nath clearly misses the mark in his discussion of *The Wild Body*. While Nath argues that "The Meaning of the Wild Body" essay should not be taken as a "document of nihilism" due to its lack of explicit references to the idea of nihilism as well as the temperament of "wonderment" expressed before the phenomena of laughter, he neglects to consider how this pathos of wonderment relates to the underlying problematic of the text, namely the tension between thought and action, which for Lewis is predicated on a kind of incommensurability between mind and body. This problematic marks a continuity with Lewis's earlier text on Shakespeare's nihilism, where it served as the framework against which he articulated a certain conception of passive nihilism. Further, the sense of wonderment which Lewis expresses in the text is not an optimistic wonderment directed at human beings and their capacities, but rather a kind of skeptical wonderment echoing Montaigne's belief in the limits of the human's capacity for both action and knowledge. For as Lewis himself writes, referring to the American philosopher William James, the phenomenon of

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laughter is predicated on the absurd, which here refers to the fact that "from nothing to being there is no logical bridge" (qtd. in Lewis 245). What Lewis highlights with his quote is the "chasm," as he puts it, between being and non-being, and the insufficiency of discursive reason to explain why there is something rather than nothing. As he writes, "It is the chasm lying between non-being, over which it is impossible for logic to throw any bridge, that, in certain forms of laughter, we leap. We land plumb in the center of Nothing" (245). Lewis's conception of the absurd is thus rooted in the insufficiency of logic to explain the possibility of this leap, which in this instance marks a discrete limit of human knowledge, just as Montaigne's conception of humor was rooted doubly in the limits of human action as well the limits of human knowledge, insofar as humans have "no means of knowing" the smallest particle of which the universe is composed (502).[6] It is a mischaracterization then to say that, temperamentally, this essay expresses the reverse of nihilism; instead, it is continuous in many ways with Lewis's earlier elaboration on a passive form of nihilism developed in his text on Shakespeare.

2.3.3   *Time and Western Man: The Nihilism of the Time-Cult*

While acknowledging the merits of Lewis's 1927 work *Time and Western Man*, Fredric Jameson notes in *Fables of Aggression* (1978) that however illuminating the work may have been at the time, it "had the unfortunate effect of forcing his readership to choose between himself and virtually everything else (Joyce, Pound, Proust, Stein, Picasso, Stravinsky, Bergson, Whitehead, etc.) in the modern canon" (Jameson, 4). Indeed, corresponding to the European scale of his concept of nihilism, Lewis states in the preface of *Time and Western Man* that his aim is to "defeat" the ideas of the "Time-Cult," a tendency of thought which for Lewis is

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[6] Further, while passive contemplation may have been the sole place of human freedom for Montaigne, it was also an ambivalent freedom insofar as it also allows for the possibility of entering into error and, in turn, despair (502).

synonymous with a wide range of European philosophers and literary modernists from the 1920s who privilege the "dynamical aspect" and "flux" of reality (xiii-xv). While the text's relation to nihilism is not at first apparent, the term is explicitly mentioned in the conclusion in relation to the philosophies of this "time-cult": The time philosophers who privilege flux or becoming as what is most real, writes Lewis, camp "somnolently, in a relative repose of a god-like sort, upon the surface of this nihilism…" (473). Departing from his earlier usage of the term in reference to Shakespeare's nihilism, which referred more to a passive nihilism of contemplation and non-action, Lewis's use of the term here is notably more critical in nature as he takes aim at the philosophies of the time-cult for their privileging of action over contemplation and becoming over being. As will be shown, contra Weller's characterization of Lewis's nihilism, this critique of the nihilism of the time-cult is colored by Lewis's theological investments, with Lewis re-invoking the tension between thought and action, only this time he explicitly situates this tension in relation to a conflict between Catholic and Protestant traditions of thought. It is worth unpacking Lewis's critique of time philosophy in this text then so as to trace another iteration of the concept of nihilism in Lewis's work which, while distinct, nonetheless responds to the same problematic of the limits of thought and action he outlined in his work on Shakespeare.

Taking aim at a wide range of philosophers and writers, Lewis argues in his essayistic style that what unites the various schools of thought he targets in his text is their belief that time and change are what is most real, rather than some form of static or supreme reality which is already in existence. Another way to formulate Lewis's characterization is that these thinkers privilege becoming over being as the place of reality. As Lewis writes of Whitehead and Alexander, for instance, the evolutionary doctrine of time preaches that "There is no supreme reality in existence. Time is real, and owing to this reality of Time and Change, it is we who are

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in the process of making a superior reality to ourselves: we are improving ourselves, in short"
(454). Lewis's first objection to this mode of thinking is here continuous with his critique of the
actionist philosophies articulated in his work on Shakespeare, insofar as the central problem he
emphasizes in this quote is the degree of agency which is assigned to humans as the promethean
shapers of their own reality. Echoing his earlier critique of Machiavelli and Nietzsche, Lewis
objects to the idea that humans can simply make or fabricate their own reality, just as he was
critical of Machiavellian readings of Shakespeare which placed too much emphasis on the power
of human action to willfully effect future outcomes or circumstances. Instead, Lewis argued in
that text for a dynamic of tragic failure and a recognition of human frailty in relation to external
inhuman forces such as fate or the gods.

Aiming to further unravel the "contradictions" of the time-cult, Lewis also directs his
critique at notions of historical progress. As he argues, the belief that a human capacity to forge a
superior reality directly corresponds to the progression of time leads to the flattering feeling that
humans at any given moment are superior to their forebearers (454). However, at the same time,
it follows that future people will "cancel" their forebearers in the "mechanical time-scale that
stretches out, always ascending, before us," and thus according to the time-cult's doctrine of
progress, humans are always being made inferior to the future (454). That is, according to Lewis,
the belief in historical progress, change, and flux as the place of reality always entails an inherent
devaluation of the world as it exists, despite the promise of improvement, for humans are always
already being made "inferior, fatally, to all the future" (454). What Lewis is trying to articulate
then is a critique of the concept of historical progress on the grounds that the assignment of
agency to humans to shape their reality through the progression of time invariably devalues
human life and the world as it exists. To illustrate this point, Lewis suggests that consciousness

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of this "time-reality" is like being a "man who is building a house that he knows to be a bad house, fit only for a low-down-in-the-scale individual like himself to live in, which will be recognized in the sequel as a thing not, in itself, worth building" (454).

Lewis is also critical of positions that take the opposite view and characterize historical time as a process principally of decline or increasing decadence, arguing that this type of position is rooted in a certain Catholic tradition of anti-modern critique that overemphasizes the worth of the past over and against the present. Associating such a view with thinkers such as Jacques Maritain and G.K. Chesterton, Lewis argues that this view is simply an inversion of the devaluation of existent reality performed by the time-philosophers of historical progress, and thus it similarly reifies a time-oriented view of reality. Describing the position of this "neo-Scholastic attitude," Lewis writes: "It attaches a disproportionate importance to *one* time, as its opponents do to *all* time," with these thinkers attacking basically everything modern that is not Thomist or Aristotelian (386). In outlining this alternative position, Lewis thus situates his own critique of the time-cult somewhere in the midst of this "battle," as he characterizes it, between the time-cult of progress and a Catholic critique of modernity, with Lewis here beginning to gesture towards the theological stakes which underly his argument (387).

Lewis's characterization of the time-philosophies of progress as belonging to a "cult" is notable insofar as Lewis assigns a religious dimension to their position as well, opposite the Catholic critique of modernity. That is, despite privileging humans and their capacity to shape reality over time, Lewis does not characterize this view as a purely secularized position for its privileging of human agency over God, but rather it is itself a "semi-religious faith" for Lewis (455). This is consistent with his discussion of "Inferior Religions" in *The Wild Body*, where he gestures towards the imbrication of the religious and the everyday in a supposedly advanced

secular society, with the time-cult constituting a kind of "inferior religion" in Lewis's eyes.

Lewis makes a similar point in *Time and Western Man*, when he argues that the differentiation between the medieval and modern as ages of faith versus reason is a historical mischaracterization; instead, as he writes, "The truth is that both, in different degrees, according to character and opportunity, were mixed ages, of revolutionary speculation associated with dogmatic faith" (310). For Lewis then the modern seems to be inescapably intertwined with the religious, and even those philosophies which place the human at their center belie certain theological presuppositions. For example, the time-cult, Lewis writes, believes in the "eternal manufacturing of a God" rather than an already existing perfection (455). Elsewhere he writes that they "transfer the seat of authority from God to man," thus positing that God does not exist as such but rather he "becomes" (387). The privileging of becoming over being then, for Lewis, is not an entirely secularized position but rather consists of positing a new God which is identified with the process of becoming. From this perspective, Lewis reasons, the time-cult seems "far less effective, when properly understood, than those cults which posit a Perfection already existing, eternally there, of which we are humble shadows" (455).

Continuing on, Lewis reasons that it would thus be very irrational to decide in favor of an "'emergent' Time-god" over "the God of the Roman faith" due to the nihilistic implications of the former position (455). Not only does Lewis impute a religious dimension to these philosophies of the time-cult then, but once more he contrasts them explicitly with Catholicism, which in this case Lewis takes to be a superior religious position because it is aligned with a view that privileges being over becoming, or a "Perfection already existing" (455). Lewis's critique in this case is colored by a defense of Catholicism, which Lewis associates with an alternative metaphysics that privileges being over becoming, with Catholicism being grounded

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on a belief in the "co-existent supremacy of perfection, impending over all your life" (455). By contrast, Lewis writes, in the case of the time-cult, you have "a kind of Nothing, which is your task, perspiring and mechanical," suggesting that the privileging of an emergent God, or a god of becoming, inadvertently reduces God to nothingness. Here Lewis suggests an ironic parallel between the time-cult of progress and the pessimism of Schopenhauer, insofar as the latter posits an aimless will to nothingness to which the conscious life of the individual is subordinated (332-334). Rephrasing the same idea more pithily elsewhere, Lewis writes that according to this position of the time-cult: "God is not. He becomes" (387). According to this view, Lewis insists, we become the "architect of nothingness," and the moment this "embryo-god" is brought into being "it would no longer be anything more than a somewhat less idiotic *you*" (455). Here then Lewis begins to arrive at the sense in which the position of the time-cult is, for him, nihilistic: nihilism in this case refers to a metaphysics of becoming facilitated through a privileging of the will over the intellect, the corresponding devaluation of existent reality, and the reduction of God to nothingness. As Lewis characterizes it in his discussion of Schopenhauer, the modality of the will which corresponds with this sense of nihilism is a kind of "demonic Will," anticipating his later recasting of nihilism in an issue of his journal *The Enemy* as a "diabolical principle" (326).

In a chapter of *Time and Western Man* entitled "God As Reality," Lewis elaborates further on the religious dimension of the time-cult, with Lewis suggesting the Protestant Reformation may mark a point of origin for the time-cult's nihilistic beliefs. The "battle" which Lewis wished to highlight between the nihilism of the time-cult and an alternative tradition of Catholic thought can thus be reinterpreted as a battle between Protestant and Catholic traditions, with Lewis aligning himself more so with Catholicism while nonetheless critiquing aspects of

this latter position.[7] Here Lewis approvingly cites from the Catholic bishop Fulton J. Sheen for his great "lucidity," and who in his book *God and Intelligence in Modern Philosophy* (1925), characterized the distinction between the Catholic and "modern" mind (386). As Fulton writes: "The intellectual (scholastic, catholic) approach begins with the world—not the world of internal experience, but the external world of movement, contingency, varied perfections, efficiency, causality, and finality" (qtd. in 388). On the other hand, the "modern approach placed itself not in the external world but in the self—the world of internal experience. It goes to God, not through the world, but through the ego'" (qtd. in Lewis 388). Taking up Fulton's distinction, Lewis then adds in his own words that this modern approach is "in the manner of the Protestant Reformation, of course, the direct plunge to God, not only without mediation or by means of reason (with all the dangers of that confusing exercise), but with a debased reliance upon some kind of semi-philosophical, half-rational image" (389). In this quote, Lewis builds on Fulton's distinction to suggests that there is a continuity with the Protestant tradition and its emphasis on an individual relationship with God without the mediation of the church, and the "modern approach" of the nihilistic time-cult which places an emphasis on the reality of the internal experience of time (389). For Lewis this is a "lunatic and egoistic" position which in turn unleashes the conditions whereby the transfer of authority from God to man can occur, or as Lewis alternatively characterizes it, to usher in a god of becoming (389). For Lewis then, the time-cult's experience of reality as "constantly melting and hotly overflowing" is directly linked to the Protestant tradition, in contrast with the Catholic view that "we should find our salvation

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[7] As described earlier, Lewis claims that the Catholic critique of modernity is sometimes expressed as a mere inversion of the time-cult's belief in progress, in turn reifying the underlying logic of the time-cult (385). In this sense Lewis does not identify totally with the Catholic position either, although he is undoubtedly much more sympathetic towards it.

in simply being what we are, without wishing to disintegrate and invade the Infinite or the mind of Deity" (405).

The implications of Lewis's characterization here are that the time-cult and its nihilistic shift towards a god of becoming, which for Lewis entails the devaluation of the existing world and the reduction of God to nothingness, are predicated on a Protestant shift towards internal experience, egoism, and the privileging of emotion over and against the intellect. In opposition to this view, what Lewis most identifies with from the Catholic tradition is Thomism and especially Aristotelianism, with Lewis writing that he prefers Aristotle's "contemplative God" over the "evolutionist God of Time and Action" (394). Once more then the tension between contemplation as performed by intellect and action is reposited, with Lewis here associating the time-cult with an over-valuation of action over and against a Catholic tradition which properly values the intellect, insofar as it begins with the contemplation of the world rather than the ever-mutable internal experience of the ego. Lewis's reoccurring emphasis on contemplation and the intellect is thus, as he characterizes it, aligned with a Catholic view of reality, and he identifies with this aspect of the Catholic tradition above any other traditions of thought despite his critique of certain Catholic critics for themselves falling into a sort of time-oriented view of reality. For as Lewis writes, reflecting on his own sympathies, "We should support the Catholic church more than any other visible institution" (391); Further, as Lewis explains, this is because "The characteristic health of the Catholic mind is an island in the midst of our 'decadence' and 'decline,' whose airs it is invigorating to breath" (390); Lastly, in the "battle" between the Catholic and "modern" time oriented positions, Lewis admits that he ultimately has "more in common with St. Thomas than with 'Time,'" alluding to his preference for the thought of Aquinas over the modern time oriented philosophies of becoming (387).

In tracing how the concept of nihilism is grounded on a metaphysical distinction that

Lewis associates with two different theological positions, it would appear that where McLuhan's

reading succeeds is its emphasis on the theological background informing Lewis's conception of

nihilism. While evidence of Lewis's supposed Gnosticism or Buddhism is ultimately

underdeveloped in McLuhan's account, the general theoretical move of situating Lewis's

conception of nihilism in relation to his characterizations of different theological traditions is

clearly necessary in the case of *Time and Western Man*. Further, McLuhan's somewhat

inconsistent emphasis on Lewis's partial commitment to a Catholic viewpoint does seem to be

substantiated by *Time and Western Man*. By contrast, Weller's interpretation of Lewis's

conception of nihilism is severely impoverished insofar as it rejects the theological valence of the

concept for Lewis entirely, instead arguing that the essence of nihilism, for Lewis, consists of the

negation of art's autonomy by the political. Weller's essay cannot sufficiently explain why this

negation constitutes the "essence" of nihilism for Lewis precisely because it elides the

theological aspect of Lewis's analysis in *Time and Western Man*, in which Lewis suggests that

the tension between intellect and will can be linked to a conflict between Catholic and Protestant

traditions of thought. Thus, while Weller acknowledges that nihilism for Lewis is linked to a

tension between will and intellect, he neglects to sufficiently uncover the theological valence of

the concept of intellect, which Lewis aligns more with a Catholic tradition of thought and its

belief in an existing perfection, over and against a reality that is in flux and entirely subject to the

will of human action.

Lewis's characterization of nihilism in *Time and Western Man* thus refers to a

metaphysics of becoming facilitated through a privileging of the will, the corresponding

devaluation of existing reality, and the reduction of God to nothingness, with Lewis suggesting

that this perspective marks a significant divergence from the Catholic tradition of thought. In this sense, nihilism for Lewis emerges out of a misapprehension of an already "existing perfection," and thus the time-cult's emphasis on flux or becoming as the place of reality overlooks what he takes to be the perfection of being. In comparison to Conrad's cosmic nihilism, Lewis's emphasis on the divergence between Catholic and Protestant traditions of thought is what allows him to characterize nihilism in terms of the scale that he does: since nihilism is rooted in a human error, a human misapprehension of reality, it is rooted in human history and so contingent in nature. After all, one of the ambivalent aspects of the intellect's freedom, according to Montaigne, was that it contains the possibility of thinking oneself into error and in turn a state of despair. Thus, the religious divergence in thought that Lewis highlights is what allows him to cast nihilism as something occurring at a much smaller scale than Conrad's nihilism. For him, nihilism emerges out of an error in thought that is rooted in a particular historical turning point in European history, namely, the reformation and its consequences.

2.3.4   The Diabolical Principle: A New Nihilism?

In the May 1927 issue of the multi-lingual modernist journal *Transition,* one of the journal's editors, Eliot Paul, claimed that a "new nihilism" was emerging in Europe following the first World War which was more virulent than any nihilism that had preceded it, and that this new nihilism involved a complete political-metaphysical break from the past. Paul's primary evidence for the emergence of this new nihilism is a short story written by the French writer and European fascist Pierre Dieu la Rochelle, which appeared in that same issue of *Transition*. Two years later this article and the accompanying text by La Rochelle would provoke a scathing critique by Lewis in his essay, "The Diabolical Principle," with these collective texts and their interactions

therefore marking another conflict over how the concept of nihilism was to be interpreted, especially in the context of post-war modernism. In probably the most sustained discussion of nihilism in any of his works, Lewis posits his own genealogy of nihilism, which he also refers to in his text as "the diabolical principle," with this genealogy aiming to undermine Paul's claim that there was anything "new" about the nihilism emerging in Europe after World War I. Lewis's critique of Paul as well as Eugene Jolas, another editor of *Transition*, serves to reiterate what he sees as nihilism's origin in the early modern and its European scale, with Lewis eventually suggesting the rootedness of the diabolical principle in a Protestant tradition of thought. In this section, I first summarize Paul's article and La Rochelle's story in order to provide an intellectual background for Lewis's piece, and then summarize Lewis's critique of the writers from *Transition* to show how his engagement with the concept of nihilism responds to Paul, La Rochelle, and Jolas in his characteristically polemical manner while also building on his discussions of nihilism from his previous texts. Once more, Lewis's characterization of nihilism is rooted in an opposition that he posits between contemplation and action, or intellect and will, only in this case Lewis elaborates more explicitly on what he sees as the political and aesthetic implications of this opposition.

In his article "The New Nihilism," Paul invokes not just the concept of nihilism but of a *new* nihilism, with Paul suggesting that this new nihilism was a "world intellectual tendency" emerging out of the devastation of World War I (166). In his text, Paul claims that this so-called new nihilism is qualitatively distinct from the nihilism that pre-war thinkers like Nietzsche and Dostoevsky were concerned with, writing that it "renounces Christ and Nietzsche as if both were schoolboys" and it goes "way beyond the Russian nihilism of Turgenev's time" (166, 168). In claiming that the war had caused a break between two different types of nihilism, Paul calls for

the re-negotiation of the meaning and origin of the problem of nihilism in response to this perceived rupture. In his text, this new nihilism is characterized by a total meaninglessness and a radical anti-humanism that abandons any naïve notion of overcoming, an "utter amorality" which "finds futility everywhere and accepts it as natural law," and it is described as a tendency of thought taking hold across national boundaries following the shock of the war (166). The main features of this new nihilism are, as Paul goes on to describe it, the increased sense of the futility of collective action, the negation of any humanist values existing before the war and with them, any notion of a "human brotherhood," and the dissipation of normative morals such that man has become "unconcerned with the pain or joy of another" (164). The end result is a radically violent solipsism which is supposedly distinct in its disregard for any normative order as well as for any faith in national collectivities.

Appearing in the same May 1927 issue of *Transition*, La Rochelle's story, "The Young European," exemplifies many of the characteristics of Paul's new nihilism. Drawing from many of the tropes of the right-wing interwar discourse on nihilism, La Rochelle's story explores the experience of political and metaphysical homelessness amidst the devastation of the war and in response to the increasingly globalized nature of capital. In the story, this experience leads to a totally indiscriminate and solipsistic form of violence as the main character engages in war and acts of murder solely for the intoxicating experience they yield. The type of nihilism explored in La Rochelle's story consists of a desire for a return to a primordial state of nature, which the narrator casts as a kind of admixture of Hobbesian brutality and Rousseau-ian wholeness, and which is realized through the speed and intoxication of a primal violence.

In the story, the main character seeks to counteract the decadent civilizational apparatus of the democratic nation-state through these experiences of intoxicating violence. As the narrator

articulates it, his underlying belief is that man is "born only for war" and "need never have left

the forest: he is a degenerate, nostalgic animal" and that everything outside of war is thus a form

of decadence (11). Thus, even though the narrator of the story does not know what nation he is a

citizen of, because he says his mother was promiscuous and he never knew his father, the

narrator enlists with the French infantry in the war. That is, the narrator's enlistment is not

prompted by a sense of nationalistic duty but, rather, simply by a desire to experience the

intensity of battle, and this is reinforced when, in a moment of spontaneity, he rather casually

defects to the German side for no real reason. The narrator describes the ecstasy of battle as a

spiritual experience that "breaks all the bonds of flesh" in a "frenzied birth orgy" of "pure spirit"

(11). In this sense then it is not even something like nationalistic sacrifice which is a source of

meaning for La Rochelle's character, but the intoxicating and highly individual experience of

battle as such, with the narrator dissolving the distinction between civilian and soldier when he

randomly murders a man in Switzerland simply to see what it feels like. Responding to a sense of

political and metaphysical homelessness in the wake of the first World War, the nihilism of La

Rochelle's story consists then of the solipsistic search for intoxicating and primordial

experiences which are aimed at negating civilizational decadence and which are realized through

individualized and completely indiscriminate acts of violence.[8]

In "The Diabolical Principle," Lewis criticizes La Rochelle's story and with it Paul's

claim concerning the emergence of a "new" nihilism, arguing that the characterization of this

form of nihilism as new "is historically inaccurate" (32). Elaborating on his disagreement over

the question of a historical break between the nihilism of Nietzsche and a post-war nihilism,

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[8] This experience as described in La Rochelle's semi-autobiographical story anticipates his eventual turn to a model
of post-national European fascism. See David Carroll's *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and
the Ideology of Culture* for a closer examination of La Rochelle's ideas.

Lewis writes that "The sort of 'Nihilism' that Nietzsche envisioned in his 'Coming of Nihilism' (it had already come when he wrote) was the same sort as Paul's 'New Nihilism'" (31). Not only does Lewis assert a continuity then between Nietzsche's nihilism and the modernist nihilism of *Transition*, opposite Paul's assertion of a discontinuity, but Lewis also asserts parenthetically that the nihilism which Nietzsche warns of was in a sense itself already a later manifestation of this trajectory, or as Lewis writes, "it had already come when he wrote" (31). In turn, over the course of his essay, Lewis gradually unfolds an alternative genealogy of nihilism that reaches back before even Nietzsche, reiterating once more his stress on modern nihilism's early modern origin.

While Lewis asserts a continuity between the nihilism of the writers of *Transition* and earlier forms of nihilism, Lewis's argument begins by conceding several distinctions. First, Lewis acknowledges what he terms an "extensive" difference in the historical spread of nihilism, as opposed to the qualitative difference in intensity which Paul asserted. As Lewis writes of the profusion of Paul's "new nihilism": "you do not change or intensify its character: but you do describe its latter day scale—for it has now become universally effective and has multiplied its power many times" (32). Lewis thus suggests that his own method for tracing continuities or discontinuities between different iterations of the concept of nihilism involves a distinction between an intensive and extensive difference of scale, with Lewis suggesting that the concept of nihilism has "multiplied its power" in the sense of its dissemination or influence, while at the same time the "intensity of its character" remains essentially the same. Lewis's evidence is what he sees as the continuity between revolutions, especially the French Revolution and October Revolution, nationalist wars, especially World War 1, and civil war, with Lewis arguing that these types of conflicts are all predicated on the form of nihilism which La Rochelle thematized

in his story. That is, they involve the cultivation of hatred, a mobilization of violent energies, and the suspension of a civilized framework of relationality. As Lewis phrases it, the type of nihilism that La Rochelle describes manifests itself as a "paralysis of our civilized or human instinct" (32). Lewis's contention then is that this "paralysis" of a civilized framework of relationality in war, which La Rochelle preferred to romanticize as the intoxicating return to a state of nature and the stripping away of the civilizational decadence of the democratic nation state, is in a sense a basic quality of any modern war or revolution. Lewis objects to the romantic valence of Rochelle's characterization of this dynamic, and further, Lewis insists that there is nothing characteristically "new" about this aspect of the experience of war and thus it is not fundamentally different in terms of its essential intensity. Instead, the profusion of civil wars, nationalist wars, and revolutions in the twentieth century, and especially the total war of World War I, constitute an extensive difference for Lewis. That is, the basic characteristic of the paralysis or suspension of a civilized framework of relationality is scaled outwards in the case of these conflicts, as exemplified for instance in La Rochelle's story wherein the lack of distinction between citizen and soldier dissolves, with this form of nihilistic violence now targeting noncombatants through indiscriminate acts of terror and murder.

Lewis's second distinction between different modes of nihilism is a distinction between what he calls a "practical nihilist" and a "romantic nihilist" (33). In the case of the practical nihilist, Lewis is referring to the "gunman-anarchist," and thus a more active and political mode of nihilism which manifests itself through acts of violent praxis. According to Lewis, the writers of *Transition* are instead of the alternative category, that of the romantic nihilist, which consists of the aestheticization of the basic attitude of the practical nihilist, "Brooding upon the romance of destruction," while at the same time professing to not be political and concerned only with art

for art's sake (33). Nihilism in this latter case is more of an aesthetic affectation or attitude, and thus although La Rochelle's story thematizes something akin to Lewis's practical nihilism, as a semi-fictional story it ultimately is more in the mode of this aesthetic or romantic nihilism. In this sense Nath's interpretation of Lewis, which emphasizes the aesthetic dimension of Lewis's nihilism, is not entirely off base. However, while Nath claims that Lewis aesthetically leverages the image of the nihilist in order to generate a certain pathos or stylistic ambience, Lewis here specifically distances himself from this aestheticization of nihilism while also emphasizing that romantic nihilism is derivative of nihilism's more violent political modalities.

Lewis goes further with his distinction between romantic and practical nihilism to assert that, whereas practical nihilism may manifest itself in acts of terrorism or assassination (the "gunman-anarchist"), romantic nihilism is reflected not just thematically in a romance of destruction but also formally through an emphasis on complexity of form and verbal opaqueness, writing for instance that a romantic nihilism manifests itself though Joyce's "mirthless formal verbal acrobatics" (44). That is, according to Lewis, the formal and stylistic difficulty of writers like Joyce and Stein is read as symptomatic of this romantic nihilism, with the difficulty of these writers being rooted in "something to do with an ego relentlessly attacked by 'power complexes'" (45). Some related characteristics Lewis assigns to this romantic nihilism are its "dogmatic subjectivism" and its tendency to reject external reality in favor of "some private mental world of the isolated mind," characterizations which echo Lewis's critique of the time-cult in *Time and Western Man* two years prior and his suggestion that this perspective was rooted in a Protestant emphasis on the truth of interior experience absent any need for external mediation (42). For Lewis, the ego of the romantic nihilist is inflected by a Nietzschean will-to-power or a Faustian urge to infinity, and when this ego is channeled into writing, it manifests

itself not just thematically as the romanticization of destruction but also through a formal and stylistic difficulty that he suggests is typical of many of his modernist contemporaries (44).

Despite Lewis's distinction between practical and romantic nihilism, he suggests that there is a shared continuity which links these modes of nihilism that is spiritual or religious in nature. "What is the difference, spiritually, between these two ventures…" Lewis asks rhetorically of his reader, to which he responds that both are rooted in a form of spiritual diabolism (40). As Lewis writes, "The nihilism *Transition* professes, again, is definitely rooted in some concept of destructive hatred, or, as Jolas puts it, 'the conception of conscious revolt, the assertion of the negative…the diabolical principle'" (40). Lewis assigns this "diabolical principle" to various French and English writers from the early to middle nineteenth century, such as Bryon, Baudelaire, and especially Lautréamont, consistent with his initial suggestion that a genealogy of nihilism would necessarily precede even Nietzsche and go beyond just German intellectual history (30). In this case then, Lewis's genealogy, aiming to assert a continuity between modernist expressions of nihilism and earlier forms that preceded even Nietzsche, is threaded by this quality of "diabolism" that Lewis implies is a "spiritual" continuity linking distinct expressions and modalities of nihilism. Thus, as Lewis writes of Paul's supposedly new nihilism: "In the first place it is not new; it is a return to the feverish diabolism that flourished in the middle of the last century in France" (30).

Lewis's suggestion that the continuity which links practical and romantic nihilism is spiritual in nature contextualizes his critique of communism, which he characterizes as a "religion," insofar as Lewis argues that communism is itself an outgrowth of this underlying spiritual principle of diabolism and thus part of the trajectory of European nihilism which he aims to outline through his genealogy (42). Though Lewis's precise political position is often

difficult to pin down because of his shifting commitments over his life, if there is one fairly consistent feature of his political thought it is perhaps his anti-communism, which is expressed in *The Diabolical Principle* when he attempts to ground his critique of communism through this re-interpretation of the meaning and scale of nihilism. Linking the diabolical principle to the figure of the militant communist, Lewis makes a comparison between this militant revolutionary and the citizen-soldier whose mobilization to fight in the Great "Nationalist War" was likewise predicated on the incitement of the diabolical principal (47). Rather than distinguishing in any qualitative way between the nationalist conflict of WWI and revolutionary communism, which theoretically is international in aspiration, Lewis instead draws a continuity between these conflicts by way of his characterization of nihilism as rooted in a spiritual principle that is diabolical. For Lewis, the "religion of communism" and its revolutionary energy is rooted in this spiritual quality of diabolism, characterized by the cultivation of hatred and satanic revolt, just as it informs the romantic nihilism of the writers of *Transition* and the political nihilism of the gunman anarchist (42). By emphasizing the connection between these types of nihilism and this underlying spiritual principle, Lewis's genealogy once more gesture towards the imbrication of the religious and the modern, a theme which he explored in *The Wild Body* and especially in *Time and Western Man*.

That Lewis's notion of diabolism is not just rooted in a romantic theme of revolt but also has a distinct theological valence is further supported by a consideration of the origin of this phrase, "the diabolical principle," which first appeared in an article from *Transition* prior to Lewis's adoption of the phrase for the title for his own essay concerning nihilism. In the October 1927 issue of *Transition*, Eugene Jolas, another editor of the journal alongside Eliot Paul, specifically refers to the "diabolical principle" in association with Lautréamont, with Lewis's

emphasis on the diabolism of Lautréamont thus being a response to the claims made in Jolas's essay. In his essay, "Enter the Imagination," Jolas posits an antinomy in modern poetry between a focus on concepts of interiority and revolt versus the traditional dogmatism of Neo-Thomistic theology. As Jolas writes of the latter position:

> It so happens that two books published in France this year seem to posture two important antinomies in modern poetry. In *Frontièrs del Poésie*, Jacques Maritain attempts to uphold traditional dogmatism, and declares himself the apologist of a 'transcendental realism' which, basing itself on purely Neo-Thomist principles, works for a spiritual renovation in the arts (157).

Against the neo-Thomist viewpoint of the Catholic Maritain, Jolas posits "the publication and re-edition of the *Œuevres complètes du Comte de Lautréamont,*" a publication which according to Jolas crystallizes the alternative "spirit" *influencing* modern poetry. Jolas poses an antinomy then between two schools of poetry which correspond, in his view, to "two philosophies of life," and as he goes on to characterize it, to two distinct theological viewpoints (158). There is the Catholic viewpoint of Maritain, which is characterized by a belief in a "mystic intelligence," the "concision of faith," and a submission to "an ethical root idea" (158); Conversely, Lautréamont's poetry embodies a "conception of conscious revolt, the assertion of the negative—or as the theologians would say—the diabolical principle" (158). Lewis cites this last quote in his own essay in order to assert the spiritual continuity between the diabolical principle and nihilism, only he leaves out Jolas's hyphenated remark, "or as the theologians would say," replacing it with ellipses. Although it is not as obvious then from just reading Lewis's essay, tracing the origin of Lewis's quote shows that it explicitly refers to a theological opposition that was originally posited in Jolas's essay in *Transition* between the Catholic, neo-

Thomist Maritain, who asserts a "hunger for God" in the poet, and the diabolism of Lautréamont, whose hymns to evil and Satan suggest, for Jolas, a "gnostic philosophy transmuted into pure poetry" (160). Further, despite Lewis's brief criticism of Maritain in *Time and Western Man*, it is notable that in this instance he prefers to direct his critique towards Lautréamont and his diabolism, which Jolas characterized as a form of modern Gnosticism. Since Lewis had himself expressed his sympathies for Catholicism's intellectual tradition and especially Thomism in *Time and Western Man*, his critique of *Transition* and its supposedly new nihilism might be interpreted in this instance then as an implicit defense of the Catholic-Thomistic tradition that Maritain is supposed to stand in for, according to Jolas's antinomy.

By threading both Paul's article and Jolas's article together, Lewis thus reveals a peculiar tension in the claims of *Transition*'s editors. Whereas Paul's article asserted a discontinuity between different nihilisms and the emergence of a new nihilism after World War I, Jolas's characterization of the diabolical principle as principle of revolt against Catholic dogmatism suggested a continuity which reaches back to Lautréamont and, in turn, even further back to Gnosticism. Thus, by linking the concept of nihilism with the diabolical principle, Lewis reveals a contradiction in the argument presented by the editors of *Transition*, who seemingly can't decide if modernist aesthetics and its "romantic nihilism," as Lewis preferred to characterize it, should be understood as a repetition or a break from the past. In these three accounts, the variability of the concept of nihilism and the distinct scales at which it is said to unfold serves to underwrite Paul's, Jolas's, and Lewis's distinct interpretations of modernism's relation to history. Specifically, for Lewis, because this nihilism is early modern in origin and European in scale, there is no qualitative break affected by the war, and further, revolutionary communism is cast as

continuous with this diabolical principle of revolt, perhaps even marking its culmination, rather than as a force by which existing political paradigms can be overturned.

Given the opposition between Catholicism and Gnosticism posited in Jolas's piece and which Lewis is directly responding to, it is worth considering whether McLuhan's characterization of Lewis's theological orientation, namely that Lewis supposedly both inhabited and critiqued a form of Gnostic nihilism, holds true given these textual engagements. Lewis, as has been established, is opposed to Paul's notion of a break in the different modes of nihilism, asserting the continuity of modern nihilism with nihilisms of the past based on a shared spiritual core, consisting namely of this diabolical principle. While at first glance McLuhan's reading seems to be confirmed then, insofar as he suggested that Lewis's theoretical texts tend to come to the defense of Catholic humanism over and against a Gnostic nihilism, it is important to stress that this antinomy between Catholicism and Gnosticism is posed specifically by Jolas, not by Lewis. Nowhere in Lewis's essay and the genealogy of nihilism which it contains does Lewis specifically claim that nihilism's origins are in Gnosticism. Despite adopting Jolas's notion of a "Diabolical Principle," and Lewis's rough agreement with Jolas in terms of how to characterize this principle—namely as an admixture of revolution for revolution's sake, a Nietzschean will-to-power, the cultivation of hatred, and a privileging of the reality of interior experience—Lewis's essay does not support the claim that the origin of this nihilism is rooted in Gnosticism.

Instead, Lewis suggests with his genealogy of nihilism that the spiritual quality of diabolism possesses a distinct relation to German Protestantism. Whereas Lewis suggested a continuity between modernist nihilism and Nietzsche, which he in turn connects to romantic diabolism, Lewis further unravels his genealogy by suggesting in the conclusion of his essay that this spiritual quality of diabolism is predicated on German Protestantism and its break from

Catholic doctrine. Lewis's claim here is brief but explicit, writing in the conclusion of the text that men like Lautréamont and their diabolical enthusiasms "are in fact inverted moralists." Going on to explain what he means by this, Lewis writes: "The 'wicked,' the 'naughty,' 'perverted,' 'masochistic,' the sentimentalism and snobbery of the 'bad,' is the other side of an obsession about some wooden 'virtue' of the German Protestant mind. From that there is no escape" (69). Lewis thus claims that German Protestantism is the condition of possibility necessary for the emergence of the spiritual quality of diabolism, a quality through which he establishes a continuity between different modes and expressions of nihilism, with this diabolism consisting of an inversion of a particular pathology rooted in the Protestant mind. Lewis thus characterizes the spiritual quality of diabolism as a reversal of this Protestant form of obsession, a reversal which does not overcome the pathology of the Protestant mind but rather further entangles the diabolical nihilist in its underlying logic ("From this there is no escape").

Although Lewis's suggestion here is brief, it is notable that his statements echo a claim made three years prior in his book *The Art of Being Ruled*, in which he claims that "the modern 'soul' began, of course, in the Reformation," once more indicating that, for Lewis, this modern pathology is rooted in the divergence between Catholic and Protestant traditions of thought, rather than WWI as Paul argues or a return to Gnosticism, as Jolas argues (27). Expanding on this claim briefly, Lewis writes: "When Luther appealed for the individual soul direct to God, and the power of all mediating authority was definitely broken, God must have foreseen that he would soon follow His viceregents" (27). Lewis considers Luther's emphasis on the relation between the individual soul and God absent the need for an external mediating authority the precondition for the destabilization of the Catholic mind, which was formerly characterized by "the trinity of God, Subject, and Object" (27). For Lewis, the Protestant mind instead collapses

this structure of mediation by emphasizing the truth of interior experience, in turn transforming "the subject into the object" and signaling a retreat into a childlike solipsism (27). Thus, when Jolas posits an antinomy between Catholic Thomism and a modern diabolical principle invested in the concept of revolt and the truth of interior experience, Lewis prefers to locate the origin of this latter perspective in the Protestant mind, with its divergence from the Catholic mind and its ensuing pathologies marking the actual origin of the diabolical principle for Lewis.

In summary, Lewis unfolds a different genealogy of nihilism from Paul and the other writers of *Transition* over the course of his essay. Whereas Paul had argued for a break between the classic nihilism of Nietzsche and a post-war modernist nihilism, Lewis instead argues for the continuity between these various forms of nihilism, insofar as they share the same spiritual core rooted in the diabolical principle. Lewis argues for the rootedness of the diabolical principle in the German Protestant mind in the sixteenth century; This in turn is connected to the French Revolution, which was driven by an obsession with the concept of revolt and putting "a bit of the jungle" back into the artifices of human life (63); From here this principle is linked to the romanticisms of Britain and Germany, and to French "diabolical" writers like Baudelaire and Lautréamont; To these writers Lewis connects Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, and to Nietzsche he connects George Sorel, all pre-war figures who exhibit this diabolical principle that Lewis then argues is entirely continuous with the romantic nihilism of La Rochelle, Paul, and the other postwar modernists of *Transition*, as well as to the practical nihilism of anarchism and militant Communism (63). Thus, in negotiating the meaning and scale of the concept of nihilism through these competing genealogies and the question of nihilism's continuities and discontinuities, these writers are also thinking through their relation to their modern and early modern past, with Lewis

reiterating the significance of nihilism's theological dimension in this text, its European scale, and its early modern origin.

2.3.5   Twentieth-Century Nihilism: Existentialism is a Nihilism?

Lewis's late work, *The Writer and the Absolute* (1952), contains a chapter which once again explicitly engages with the concept of nihilism in order to emphasize its theological dimension and its association with a principle of action and revolt. The chapter, entitled "Twentieth Century Nihilism," is dedicated to a critique of Existentialism, especially the strain of atheistic Existentialism associated with Sartre and to a lesser degree Heidegger.[9] According to Lewis, Sartre's nihilism has several characteristics: the over-romanticization of human action and with it an aggressive attack on God; the dehumanizing preference for intuition and sense over the intellect; the severing of man from the external world as performed by phenomenological bracketing; the reduction of the absolute to the immediacy of temporal experience; and a rhetoric of crisis and despondency which is imported from Kierkegaard. To recall, in *The Lion and the Fox*, Lewis had critiqued the actionist philosophy of Machiavelli for an overinvestment in the freedom of humans to shape their reality, and in *Time and Western Man* he had attributed a form of nihilism to the members of the so-called time-cult for their privileging of a metaphysics of becoming and an overinvestment in the human will, the corresponding devaluation of existing reality, and the reduction of God to nothingness. In "Twentieth-Century Nihilism," Lewis revives these critiques, only now they are directed at the Existentialism of Sartre, with Lewis ultimately casting him as a nihilist. In this sense then, the concept of nihilism becomes a continuous thread which ties together Lewis's various critiques, first of the actionist school or will school of

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[9] Lewis acknowledges the Christian Existentialism of Jaspers as well but doesn't comment on it, suggesting that he is aware of different strains of Existential thought (129n1).

philosophy, aligned with Machiavelli and Nietzsche, then of the time-cult of Bergson, Whitehead, and others, then of the "romantic nihilists" featured in the modernist journal *Transition*, and now of the Existentialists Sartre and Heidegger. This final section turns to Lewis's essay on Existentialism as a form of nihilism in order to characterize this later iteration of the concept in Lewis's work, exploring how it is continuous and discontinuous with his earlier engagements.

Despite his general distaste for Marxism, Lewis's critique of Sartre somewhat surprisingly begins by building on the thought of the French Marxist thinker Lefebvre in order to try and characterize some of the basic premises of Existentialist thought (123). As Lewis writes, in this instance, "the Catholic and Marxist unite to denounce the nihilism of the Existentialists" (124). Citing Lefebvre, Lewis first characterizes classic metaphysics as the belief that "ultimate reality was 'beyond and outside what we immediately experience'" (qtd. in Lewis 123). Continuing to paraphrase Lefebvre, Lewis then argues that Existentialism, by contrast, involves the inversion of this perspective, with reality being assigned to the immediate and concrete (123). Distilling this in his own words, Lewis then adds: "The origin of the term 'existential' is to be looked for in this immediacy—and also concreteness" (123). According to Lewis and his references to Lefebvre then, classical metaphysics is characterized by its positing of an absolute somewhere else in existence, a kind of supersensible realm, whereas Sartre's Existentialism is characterized as a reversal of this principle. Further, following from this reversal, reason is replaced with intuition and sense, with the latter becoming the new organs of reality. As Lewis characterizes it then, as a result of this inversion of classic metaphysics, "even the big toe and the penis has priority over the mind" and the "eggs and bacon we have for breakfast" become "the stuff of the Ding-an-Sich" (123). What Lewis is trying to illustrate with these examples of the

Existentialist viewpoint is how the notion of the absolute ceases to be posited outside of experience, as it was in classic metaphysics, and instead it is "implicated with our temporal existence," elevating the sensory and intuitive and devaluing the contemplative intellect (123). "Even Kierkegaard's 'leap,'" writes Lewis, "never took him outside the walls of his body," suggesting that even in the case of the Christian Existentialism of Kierkegaard, this privileging of the intuitive confined him to a bodily experience of feeling over and against the intellectual and rational (124). Lewis's critique of Existentialism contains from the outset then a general continuity with his past critiques, with Lewis claiming Sartre's Existentialism devalues the intellect or the mind as the organ of contemplation, and instead emphasizes the immediately sensible and the intuitive as the place of reality. As was shown in the case of that earlier text as well as "The Diabolical Principle," for Lewis this viewpoint corresponds to a particular relation to reality that he goes so far as to characterize as pathologically Protestant in orientation, due to its overinvestment in the truth of unmediated interior experience. Although Lewis does not explicitly label his own position as Catholic in this case, his suggestion that the Catholic and Marxist are aligned in this aspect of their critique is striking insofar as the Marxist in this momentary intellectual alliance is clearly a reference to Lefebvre, with Lewis's implicitly suggesting then that in this case he is intellectually aligned with the Catholics.

Continuing his critique of Sartre, Lewis further pursues this continuity between Sartre's Existential nihilism and the nihilism he had described in his earlier critiques, here re-invoking the tension between thought and action, or will and intellect. According to Lewis, by supplanting the mind for intuition and sense, Sartre's Existentialism redefines what it is to be human in a way which both inadvertently undermines his purported humanism and which mischaracterizes the nature of human freedom. Whereas Sartre suggests in certain texts that his Existentialism is

consonant with a certain notion of humanism, Lewis argues this is a contradictory

characterization insofar as Existentialism's devaluation of the mind in favor of intuition and

sense as the organs of reality means that, contrary to the classic Aristotelian definition, man

ceases to be "an essentially thinking animal" (124).[10] Instead, man becomes a "willing" and

"wishing" animal, and so above all, according to Lewis, "an acting animal" (124). According to

this viewpoint, man is transformed into a reasoning animal only "on the side" and to think

becomes a mere hobby; instead, "feeling" is his defining quality (124). However, for Lewis, this

is dehumanizing, insofar these qualities of intuition, feeling, and action are the same "means of

apprehension shared with the Lizard and the Bee" (123). Lewis imputes to Sartre's

Existentialism then the same sort of qualities which he had previously assigned to Machiavelli's

actionist philosophy, namely, the privileging of action over and against Shakespeare's and

Montaigne's contemplative intellect. Mocking Sartre in particular, Lewis writes that, for the

Existentialist, "almost any simple little action, like asking a man for a light in the street,

impresses them" (124). To Lewis, however, there is something even less impressive about

Sartre's actionist philosophy when compared to Machiavelli's, for whereas Machiavelli at least

wrote about the actions and decisions of great princes and republics, with these forms of political

action and decision being thematized in Shakespeare's works, Sartre's overinvestment in action

goes so far as to romanticizes even the most mundane of activities, such as asking for a lighter on

a street corner. Like Montaigne, Lewis instead suggests that thought and contemplation are what

most distinguishes humans and their ambivalent form of freedom, instead of the body and its

sensory apparatus, the intuition, or the capacity for action, qualities which are all shared with

animals. Lewis's critique of Sartre's Existentialism has to do in part then with a disagreement

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[10] See Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism."

over the nature of human freedom, with Sartre suggesting this freedom is expressed through

action and an emphasis on the intuition, whereas Lewis, like Montaigne, suggests that this

element of freedom is realized in the intellect through reason and contemplation.

The other aspect of Lewis's critique is linked to Existentialism's emphasis on time, with

Lewis asserting a continuity between Existentialism and the kinds of thinkers he critiqued in his

earlier work, *Time and Western Man*. If the absolute ceases to be perceived as external to man, as

it is in Existentialism, according to Lewis, it then comes to be experienced as immanent in the

concreteness of man's temporal experience, a notion which Lewis was generally suspicious of in

his book on the time-cult. In fact, in a footnote in the chapter Lewis indicates that Heidegger's

Sein und Zeit would have been one of his most "valuable exhibits" back in 1927 when he wrote

his book on the time-cult, had he known of Heidegger's work back then (125n1). Briefly

commenting on Heidegger's work, Lewis writes that "Zeit is of its essence as it is of one and all

of these thinkers," with this emphasis on temporal experience allowing Lewis to link

Existentialism to the nihilism of the time-cult (125). As Lewis writes, asserting this continuity, "I

am taken back, as a result of the Existenz philosophy, to Time and Western Man" (125). As

Lewis characterizes the emphasis on temporal experience in *The Writer and the Absolute*,

Sartre's Existentialism involves the merging of the absolute into time, which in turn "affects a

break with all traditional metaphysics, and of course with Christian traditional thinking" (124).

For Lewis, this break is paradoxically one of the qualities that allows him to then assert a

continuity between disparate ideas and philosophies, insofar as they are all the outgrowth, in

Lewis's mind, of a divergence from the Catholic intellectual tradition, with the philosophies of

this break all emphasizing time, process, and becoming over an already existing perfection or an

external absolute. For this reason, recalling his previous work on time, Lewis writes: "When I

described them all as suffering from the effects of the same poison, I found few to agree with me except the Catholics" (126). Here Lewis suggests that it was only the Catholic viewpoint which tended to agree with him and his characterization of this break as the continuity which links these disparate philosophies, political orientations, and aesthetic techniques, all privileging notions of time, becoming, and the capacity of the human will to shape these processes (126).

Once more then, the emphasis on the concreteness of man's temporal experience is, for Lewis, marked by a divergence from a Catholic tradition of thought, insofar as it seeks to reinscribe the absolute into a form of immanent experience which is always running ahead of itself. This break allows for an "elation of feeling that he is battling his way into his future," with Lewis here emphasizing how the inscription of the absolute into concrete temporal experience inflates the Existentialist's sense of self and capacity for action, insofar as he perceives himself as the shaper of his own future. This recalls Lewis's critique of the time-cult and their optimistic belief in historical progress, wherein they overemphasized the capacity to willfully shape historical outcomes, only now for Lewis this idea has become even more individualized in the case of Existentialism, with everyone seeking to shape their own individual reality. But for Lewis, this perception would necessarily dissipate if man were to come to his senses and recognize that, in fact, "he is not after all a work of art—that the initial creation was far beyond his powers or that of any man" (127), with Lewis recalling Montaigne's emphasis on man's fragility and weakness when he places himself in relation to God's external creation. It is the severing of this relation to an external and supersensible absolute that, as Lewis sees it, inflates man's self-conception to the point where he imagines himself as the shapers of his own reality, continually battling into the future through a process of becoming which is fought at the level of temporal experience.

Lastly, in his critique of Sartre's Existentialism, Lewis highlights what he sees as the peculiar tension between Sartre's emphasis on the freedom of humans to act and shape their own future, and the pathos of despair and angst which always seems to accompany this freedom. For Lewis, this pathos of despair is predicated on two conditions, first, Husserl's notion of phenomenological bracketing, and second, the Christian background and pathos established in Kierkegaard's philosophy. As Lewis writes, "Kierkegaard is responsible for its atmosphere of crisis and despair—whereas Husserl supplied it with its vitalist framework" (129). For Lewis, Husserl's notion of phenomenological "bracketing" contributes to this pathos of despair and angst when the Existentialist aims through bracketing to "cut himself off from all this, from the external world" (126). Having cut himself off from the external world through this device of bracketing, man finds himself in "an empty house—a void, a nothing" because he has in advance rejected any notion of essence and has reduced reason, or the intellect, "to the status of a despised drudge" (126). For Lewis, if the intellect through which one contemplates external creation is suppressed in advance, and then the device of bracketing cuts one off from the external world, then the Existentialist necessarily becomes trapped in his ego and "flings himself on the floor and contemplates his echoless vacuity" (126). In addition to this solipsistic prison which the Existentialist creates for himself, the "despondent" vocabulary of the Existentialist (angst, anguish, dereliction, loneliness, despair) is imported from the Christian background of the Lutheran Kierkegaard. To Lewis, Kierkegaard is responsible for "the atmosphere of crisis and despair" linked to a mystic, interior experience (129). For Lewis, Sartre's atheistic despair, which is produced out of the recognition that one is condemned to be free, transplants a whole vocabulary of despondency and despair from the Christian Kierkegaard and the pathos he established, and thus is not as atheistic in character as Sartre would like to believe. As Lewis sees

it, it is the conjunction of this device of phenomenological bracketing, which aims to cut one off from the external world, and the atmosphere of crisis and interior mystic experience expressed by Kierkegaard, which then becomes synthesized in Sartre's work. While Sartre professes to be atheistic, Lewis emphasizes how Sartre's philosophy is nonetheless rhetorically dependent on the Christian background established in Kierkegaard's work, if not structurally dependent in terms of its emphasis on intuition, the vitality of interior experience, and the devaluation of reason or the intellect. Lewis therefore concludes that, despite Sartre's professed atheism, "God plays a major part in existentialist philosophy" (128).

2.4   Conclusion

Tracing the various iterations of the concept of nihilism in Lewis's theoretical works and essays, several continuities and discontinuities were distilled in this chapter that point to the scale at which Lewis's concept of nihilism is thought. In *The Lion and the Fox,* Lewis uses the concept to refer to a mode of aesthetical representation characterized by its moral indifference as well as a skepticism of action, expressed through a dynamic of tragic failure. This is articulated in relation to Shakespeare's tragedies, which Lewis linked to the contemplative essays of Montaigne, over and against the action-oriented philosophy of Machiavelli, with Lewis casting this as a kind of passive nihilism. *The Wild Body* reiterates this underlying problematic concerning the tension between thought and action. Though nihilism is not explicitly referred to in this second text, the skeptical wonderment expressed in the text echoes Montaigne's belief in the limits of the human's capacity for both action and knowledge, while also suggesting the unfreedom of the body and the senses over and against the freedom of the intellect, with Lewis thus responding to a similar problematic and thematizing, again, a form of passive nihilism.

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Although responding to a similar problematic, Lewis's characterization of nihilism in *Time and Western Man* shifts its analysis to a more active form of nihilism, linked here to a metaphysics of becoming facilitated through a privileging of the will, the corresponding devaluation of existing reality, and the reduction of God to nothingness, with Lewis suggesting that this modern perspective marks a significant divergence from the Catholic tradition of thought which is rooted in a specific moment in European history. In this case the theological dimension of his concept of nihilism is expressed more explicitly, referring to nihilism in its more active mode, although it is still thought in relation to the tension between action and thought and the question of man's proper relation to the external world. Next, whereas Paul had argued for a break between the classic nihilism of Nietzsche and a post-war nihilism, in "The Diabolical Principle," Lewis instead argues for the continuity between various forms of nihilism, claiming they share the same spiritual core that is predicated on a Protestant pathology. For Lewis, the diabolical principle refers to this spiritual core that links various active nihilisms, both practical and romantic, and this diabolical principle is characterized by the conception of conscious revolt, the assertion of the negative, the overinvestment in the human will, and a privileging of the reality of interior experience. Reiterating his claim in *Time and Western Man*, Lewis suggests that these characteristics are rooted in a divergence between the Catholic and Protestant mind, and thus once more his concept of nihilism is conditioned on the Reformation as a specific turning point in European history. Lastly, in *The Writer and the Absolute*, the nihilism of Sartre's existentialism refers to an overinvestment in the human will and its capacity for action, a dehumanizing preference for intuition and sense over the intellect, the severing of man from the external world, the reduction of the absolute to the immediacy of temporal experience, and a rhetoric of crisis and despondency. In this case, Lewis revives the tension between thought and action to critique

Sartre's action-oriented position while simultaneously reasserting nihilism's theological dimension. Similarly, he also criticizes Existentialism for its emphasis on time and feeling over an external absolute which circumscribes the human capacities for knowledge and action and in relation to which the limits and the frailty of the human can be contemplated. The continuities between these various characterizations of nihilism ground Lewis's critiques of his intellectual and political opponents, with the question of a "break" which is negotiated in these textual interactions serving as an occasion for Lewis and his various intellectual enemies to think through their relation to their modern and early modern past.

In the process of tracing the various iterations of the concept of nihilism in Lewis's work, this chapter has also gestured towards the insufficiencies of other critical interpretations of Lewis's concept of nihilism. By showing how Lewis repeatedly situates the concept of nihilism in relation to various theological problems, I indicate how Weller's characterization of Lewis's nihilism as purely political is clearly not sufficient. While Lewis is concerned with the negation of art's autonomy by the political, his concern is rooted in preserving what he sees as the intellect's proper relation to external reality, a relation which for him corresponds to a Catholic intellectual orientation and which is threatened by the modern "soul's" divergence from this tradition. In turn, McLuhan is right to raise the question of the concept's theological dimension, but he frames the theological problem incorrectly, or at least he lacks proper evidence to support his reading. The tension Lewis explores is not Gnosticism versus Catholicism, an antinomy proposed instead by Jolas, but rather the divergence between the Catholic and Protestant mind. Lastly, Nath aims to stress some of Lewis's early modern influences, such as Shakespeare, over his engagements with Nietzsche, assuming that this demonstrates Lewis's disinterestedness in the concept of nihilism. Instead, this chapter has shown that Lewis's conception of nihilism is in fact

informed largely through his engagements with the early modern, with Nath failing to attend to these engagements in his reading. Further, even if the concept of nihilism as it is expressed by Lewis lacks a certain philosophical coherence, as Nath argued, there are nonetheless many continuities between Lewis's various discussions of the concept which suggest similar themes, questions, and philosophical ideas, all of which are unfolded in his essayistic and polemical pieces. These references to nihilism are thus not just scattered and inchoate, aimed solely at cultivating a certain artistic ethos or generating a certain aesthetic atmosphere, but rather they mark instances of serious conceptual engagement on Lewis's part.

Lastly, while Conrad and Lewis both raise questions concerning the limits of human knowledge and agency, there is a stark ontological difference between their two conceptions of nihilism. For Conrad, the limits imposed on human action are rooted doubly in a relation to human civilization, characterized as a process of power preservation and enhancement to which individual human agency is subordinated, as well as a cosmic process of dissipation and exhaustion which circumscribes human history, with Conrad's nihilism oscillating between these different scales. While Lewis is likewise concerned with the limits of human action and knowledge, the concept of nihilism which he is most fixated on is framed as emerging out of a mistaken belief or a misapprehension of an already "existing perfection," and thus active nihilism in the form of the diabolical principle is more ideological in character for Lewis than it is for Conrad. That is, whereas Conrad's cosmic nihilism moves beyond a human scale of history and instead makes a claim concerning the very logic of being as process of dissipation, Lewis directly criticizes the emphasis on flux or becoming as the reduction of being to "nothingness," claiming that this view overlooks what he takes to be the existing perfection of being. Lewis's emphasis on the religious background of his concept of nihilism allows him to instead cast

passive nihilism as the contemplation of human fragility and limits in relation to this existing

perfection, whereas active nihilism is interpreted as much smaller in scale than Conrad's

nihilism, with Lewis casting this mode of nihilism as a confused idea that is rooted in a

"mistaken" theological perspective emerging out of the early modern period and which is

principally European in scale.

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CHAPTER 3

A TROPICAL PURITANISM: ANTHONY LUDOVICI'S CONCEPT OF NIHILISM AND ITS TRANSLATION TO ENGLISH MODERNIST CONTEXTS

3.1   Introduction

Now largely forgotten, Anthony Ludovici was a pivotal figure in the conservative reception of Nietzsche's philosophy in England who stressed the antidemocratic and aristocratic dimensions of Nietzsche's thought as he sought to transpose the Nietzschean problematic of European nihilism into an English context. Despite the lack of critical attention concerned with Ludovici's concept of nihilism, his early work warrants attention insofar as he corresponds to a third type of nihilism which can be contrasted against Conrad and Lewis and which is important for understanding the different ways in which nihilism was conceptualized in modernist debates and discussions. To that end, this chapter analyzes Ludovici's deployment of the concept of nihilism and its relation to concepts of historical decline, decadence, and pessimism to further demonstrate the conceptual variability of nihilism, tracing first Ludovici's distillation of the concept from Nietzsche's philosophy and second his transposition of this concept to both early modern and English modernist contexts. In doing so, this chapter shows how Ludovici's concept of nihilism corresponds to a third type of nihilism which is characterized principally by its passive or defensive relation to power and which is transposed to a narrower, more national scale of history.

Like Conrad and Lewis, nihilism for Ludovici is a concept which can be linked to a skepticism of historical progress, the limits for human action to affect historical outcomes, and the limits of human knowledge. However, this chapter also shows how Ludovici's characterization of nihilism diverges from Conrad's and Lewis's engagements with the concept in several significant ways:

First, whereas the conception of nihilism which Lewis criticized was characterized by an overinvestment in a principle of action, a perspective which he aligned with early modern thinkers like Machiavelli and his successor Nietzsche, Ludovici largely inverts this formula to instead criticize nihilism's passive form as a defensive and reactionary relation to power, a characterization which he derives primarily from Nietzsche. As opposed to the Shakespearean nihilism of human fragility and limits characterized by Lewis, passive nihilism for Ludovici refers to the extent to which both Christian and democratic moral frameworks, as "slave" moralities, preclude the active creation of value and lead to a situation of aimlessness, fermenting both cultural decadence and political anarchy. Similarly, while Conrad thematized the overbearing will of the civilizational knitting machine, which appeared to nullify the agency of the characters in his narrative, Ludovici's Nietzschean differentiation between herd and noble moralities leads him to only portray individuals in the former group as lacking sufficient agency. By contrast, Ludovici characterizes those of a noble morality in terms of an aristocratic embodiment of the will to power, a modality of the will which he argues is necessary for overcoming the passive nihilism of Christianity and democracy.

Second, there is a difference in terms of the genre through which Ludovici's engagement takes place. Whereas Conrad engages with the concept of nihilism largely through literature in order to explore the ambiguities of nihilism's scale and the ephemerality of language and

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memory, and whereas Lewis's engagements with the concept occur through various essayistic texts responding to the shared problematic concerned with the tension between action and thought, section 3.2 of this chapter shows how Ludovici's engagement with the concept is focused on demonstrating above all the philosophical coherence of Nietzsche's thought in order to present it as a systematic totality. Here, Ludovici's preference for a philosophical mode of engagement has to do with his attempt to distill a unified and overarching system of thought in order to support his claim that Nietzsche's philosophy performatively overcomes nihilistic aimlessness through its articulation of a singular principle of elevation, i.e., the will to power. Further, as highlighted in section 3.3 of this chapter, Ludovici also moves from a consideration of nihilism at the conceptual level to a consideration of nihilism at the level of sense experience, which is explored in his art criticism for *The New Age.* As I show, Ludovici's theory of art is positioned against a principle of aesthetic autonomy and instead aims to interpret art as symptomatic of an underlying relation to life which can be characterized in terms of its health or sickness. For Ludovici, a principle of art for art's sake or a Kantian emphasis on technique and form are defensive reactions to nihilistic aimlessness rather that truly regenerative aesthetic modes, and aesthetic theory and artistic production should instead adopt a Nietzschean principle of art for life's sake. Ludovici thus argues for the interpenetration of the political and the aesthetic, a sentiment to which Lewis was strongly opposed, by arguing that an aristocratic framework of value creation should correspond to an aesthetic principle of art for life's sake.

Third, although Ludovici's interpretation of the problematic of nihilism moves between different scales of nihilism, his work introduces the notion of a specifically "English" scale of nihilism which originates out of the English Civil Wars and the spread of the Puritan "archetype," gesturing towards a narrower scale of nihilism which is distinct from the early

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modern European nihilism with which Lewis was concerned and the cosmic scale of nihilism

gestured towards in Conrad's writing. By extension, another significant distinction between

Ludovici and Lewis is how they articulate nihilism's early modern origins, particularly in terms

of its theological preconditions. Whereas Lewis cast Protestantism as the one of the

preconditions for European nihilism because of its pathos of revolution for revolution's sake and

its overemphasis on the interior reality of the individual, Ludovici offers a very different

characterization of a similar origin. Ludovici suggests that Protestantism, and in particular its

English Puritan form, serves as a precondition for the decadent turn in English history due to its

resentful relation to aristocratic power, its turn towards a principle of disinterested

contemplation, and its ascetic disciplining of the body. Thus, while both writers hone in on a

similar historical flashpoint as key for the emergence of nihilism, Ludovici and Lewis offer

different characterizations of nihilism's theo-political background.

In this chapter, I focus on Ludovici's early thought, firstly as an English translator of

Nietzsche, and secondly as a frequent contributor to Albert Orage's journal *The New Age* (1907-

22), a journal "whose combination of socio-political radicalism with avant-garde cultural theory

made it for at least a decade the most important Anglophone organ for disseminating the

'modernist mindset'" (Griffin 135). While Ludovici continued to write late into his life, I focus

on his work from this early period for two reasons. First, I claim that it is through his early

interpretations and translation of Nietzsche that Ludovici distills his specific conception of

nihilism. Second, the period immediately following his translation of Nietzsche, during which he

contributed to Orage's journal with the aim of transposing Nietzsche's philosophy to an English

context, is what marks his most explicit participation in the English modernist milieu. Through

his work in this journal, which was informed by his conception of nihilism as he distilled it from

Nietzsche, Ludovici engages with figures such as G.K. Chesterton, T.E. Hulme, and Wyndham Lewis, thus situating him as a notable, albeit forgotten figure within this English modernist ecosystem.

Accordingly, in section 3.2, I perform a reading of Ludovici's translator's prefaces and notes as well as the notes of his collaborator, Oscar Levy, in order to distill Ludovici's conception of nihilism. This section shows that nihilism for Ludovici, as he derives it from Nietzsche, is characterized by a denial of life, aimlessness, and a passive or even resentful relation to power, characteristics which he ascribes to both democracy and Christianity. For Ludovici, nihilism characterizes these specific moral environments because they are averse to a principle of elevation, i.e., the will to power, and thus are incapable of fostering the emergence of exceptional or aristocratic figures who can supply mankind with orienting values absent the need for some supersensible source of authority. Section 3.3 of this chapter shows how Ludovici transposes these qualities of nihilism to both an early modern as well as a modernist context, recasting the nihilism of democracy and Christianity as specifically English parliamentarism, commercialism, and Puritanism. In this way, I show how Ludovici corresponds to a third type of engagement that is markedly different from Conrad's and Lewis's interpretation of the problematic, insofar as Ludovici emphasizes nihilism at the scale of national history while advocating for a more active form of value creation as a response to this nihilism.

3.2   "Nietzsche in England": The Systematic Translation of Nietzsche into English

In 1909, Anthony Ludovici published his English translation of Nietzsche's *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* (1876). While not the first of Nietzsche's works to be translated

into English, the text's publication was significant insofar as it marked the start of a collaborative effort between Ludovici and his editor, Oscar Levy, to systematically translate Nietzsche's work into the English language, with Ludovici going on to translate six volumes out of what would become an eighteen-volume collection. The project to translate Nietzsche's collected works into English began when Oscar Levy (1867-1946), a German Jewish physician and scholar of Nietzsche, traveled to Germany to secure the rights to the project. In an editorial note published in Ludovici's 1909 translation of *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen—*which Ludovici rendered as *Thoughts Out of Season*—Levy notes that he had acquired the rights to this translation project directly from Nietzsche's sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, while on a trip to Germany (viii). In his note, Levy recalls that he had met personally with Förster-Nietzsche to assure her that she was not handing over the rights to an "ordinary publisher," but rather that he regarded his project of translating Nietzsche into the English language as "somewhat holy" and that, as such, he would not consent to "'sugaring' of the original text to further the sale of books" (viii). Levy had also earned a reputation as a "leading exponent of Nietzsche's philosophy" within English circles after the publication of his 1906 work, *The Revival of Aristocracy*, with this reputation surely contributing to his success in securing the rights to the project (Thatcher 235). After managing to convince Förster-Nietzsche to give him the rights to the project, Levy's next hurdle was finding the right collaborators. For, as he described it, the translators he would choose for the project needed to have not just an exact knowledge of the German tongue, but also a "sympathy and a certain enthusiasm for the startling ideas of the original," implicitly referring to the anti-democratic and anti-Christian ideas of Nietzsche which Levy goes on to emphasize in a later part of the text's prefatory essay (vii).

In 1906, several years prior to Levy's trip, after having worked for a year as an assistant to the French sculptor François Auguste-René Rodin, the English-born Ludovici traveled to Germany to immerse himself in study of the country's language and thinkers. Levy indicates that Ludovici has gone to Germany specifically to study and meditate on Nietzsche's work, writing the following in his introduction to Ludovici's *Who Is to Be Master of the World?* (1909): "you, dear Mr Ludovici, told me yourself that, after a book of Nietzsche's had once fallen into your hands, you found no rest or peace until you had gone to Germany, learnt German, and thought and meditated there—in the solitude of a foreign country—on Nietzsche's teaching until you understood it" (x). During his time in Germany, Ludovici became a devoted Nietzschean, honing in on Nietzsche's critiques of Christian morality, liberal democracy, and Nietzsche's interest in positing an aristocratic or noble form of morality (Stone 342). Ludovici's period of study culminated in a series of lectures delivered at the University of London in 1908, wherein he characterized all of human history as a continual state of war between master and slave moralities (Ludovici 43).[11] While it is unclear where Levy and Ludovici first met, Levy's introduction suggests that it could have been by way of these lectures, or else that they encountered each other informally at the British Museum.[12] Thatcher's 1970 study, *Nietzsche in England*, likewise indicates that Levy's interest in Ludovici was probably sparked by Ludovici's lectures at the University of London (237). In any case, Levy approved of Ludovici's lectures on Nietzsche and his reading of human history as a process of continual war between two dueling forms of morality, writing in a letter to Ludovici, later published as the introduction to *Who Is to*

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[11] "In mankind, there is a continual war…The war is a war of values; occasionally, as history shows, it becomes a war of grapeshot and guillotines—a war to the knife; but the values that are fought for are always the values of *master-morality* on the one hand and *slave morality* on the other" (Ludovici, *Who Is to Be Master of the World?*, 43)
[12] "I myself have often, and unobserved by you, seen you in the British Museum walking about in the depth of thought, and I liked you for it" (Levy x).

Be Master of the World?: "I like your lectures—I think them, in their lucidity, even the best I have read in your language" (ix). With a thorough grasp of the language and immersed in the anti-Christian and anti-democratic dimensions of Nietzsche's thought, Ludovici thus possessed the qualifications to contribute to Levy's project.

In 1909, the two began work on the project of translating Nietzsche's collected works into the English language. Notably, the situation and occasion for the overall project, at least as Levy frames it in in his prefatory essay to Ludovici's translation of *Thoughts Out of Season*, was what he took to be England's historical destiny and the decadent telos towards which it was moving. As Levy saw it, England was fated to encounter the same "threatening Nihilism of Modern Europe," and thus Nietzsche, as the diagnostician of nihilism, offered both a prophetic insight into England's future as well as a guide to overcoming this predicament (xxi). As Levy characterized it, Nietzsche was needed then for the English context precisely because his thought represented a counter-current to European nihilism and thus could aid England as it inevitably descended into political and aesthetic decadence.

In this section, I turn to various documents surrounding Levy's and Ludovici's translation project, examining how nihilism, or a certain conception of nihilism as it was thought by Ludovici and his intellectual partner Levi, was the primary condition that, as they saw it, warranted the project of translating Nietzsche's collected works into English. I dwell on various editorial and translator prefaces written by Levy and Ludovici, first to contextualize the aims of the overall translation project the two embarked on, and second to distill the particular manner in which the concept of nihilism was thought by Levy and Ludovici. Although Ludovici's articulation of nihilism is of course determined to a large extent by Nietzsche's own discussions of the idea, Ludovici nonetheless stresses particular aspects of the concept which are his own and

which therefore give insight into not just the intercultural translation of Nietzsche into the English context, but specifically the translation of the concept of nihilism into English. The translation of Nietzsche and his conception of nihilism into English by Ludovici thus represents another instance of the interpretation and re-negotiation of nihilism's meaning in the context of English modernism which was distinct from Conrad's and Lewis's interpretation of the problematic.

3.2.1   *Levy's Nietzsche and His Value for the English Mind*

In an introductory essay prefacing Ludovici's 1909 translation of *Thoughts Out of Season*, entitled "Nietzsche in England," Levy characterizes the significance of his overall project of translating Nietzsche's collected works into English, emphasizing in particular the aristocratic, anti-democratic dimension of Nietzsche's thought and its value for the English context. Describing the general background of Nietzsche's reception in England, Levy claims that England had yet to fully realize its democratic destiny when compared to continental nations such as France, and yet at the same time he argues that certain concepts essential to European forms of liberal democracy emerged out of an English intellectual context. Even if England had only entered into the "stream" of democracy in an intellectual sense then, Levy argues that England nonetheless belongs to the same historical trajectory as continental Europe insofar as it is destined for its own period of democratic decline, fated to encounter the same "threatening Nihilism of Modern Europe" (xxi). According to Levy, Nietzsche's thought might serve as an invaluable guide for English society, insofar as Nietzsche articulated an aristocratic framework of value capable of overcoming the democratic nihilism of the continent. Given Ludovici's and Levy's partnership on this translation project and the affinities between their respective

characterizations of Nietzsche, it is worth considering some of the ideas outlined in Levy's essay

so as to trace how they foreground and interact with Ludovici's own interpretation of Nietzsche's

thought and specifically his concept of nihilism. In section 3.3, I then show how Ludovici places

further emphasis on the national scale of this nihilism which Levy introduces in this essay.

Levy's essay begins by asserting what he sees as several qualitative differences between

the German and English mind in order to characterize both the difficulty and the necessity of

translating Nietzsche into the English context. Addressing a specifically English audience, Levy

posits a contrast between two gendered national archetypes, distinguishing between the

masculine and philosophically deep German mind that is at risk of being driven into madness,

versus the receptive but ultimately shallow and utilitarian mind of the English. According to

Levy, the "fair-minded" Englishmen have failed to produce any thinkers as "manly and daring"

as Nietzsche, instead being characterized by their shallow and "feminine receptivity" to foreign

ideas (xii). Given this characterization of the differences between the German and English mind,

the question Levy's essay poses is what it is about the English mind which has specifically

precluded the wider reception of Nietzsche in England, and to argue for a reassessment of the

value of Nietzsche's thought for the English context. While Levy's characterizations of different

national types suggest his belief in a qualitative difference between the German and English

mind, he also goes on to assert a European trajectory which circumscribes both national

traditions, with both nations being destined for a form of European nihilism unleashed by liberal

democracy. In characterizing Nietzsche's philosophy as a response to European nihilism, the

situation of nihilism thus becomes an occasion for Levy to articulate a specific relation between

national and trans-national scales of history, with Levy suggesting over the course of the essay

that European nihilism may be rooted in the conjunction of German Protestantism and English liberalism.

In his analysis, Levy posits three potential reasons for the resistance to Nietzsche in England. In the first case, Levy surmises that the resistance to Nietzsche may simply be related to the "terrible abuse which Nietzsche poured upon the heads of the innocent Britishers" (xiv). That is, Nietzsche's scathing critiques of the English whom he branded as "illogical, plebian, shallow, utilitarian Englishmen," may have made him less palatable to the English mind (xiv). Levy thus suggests that Nietzsche's negative characterizations of the English have contributed to his neglect in the country.

The second reason Levy gives for the neglect of Nietzsche in the English context is that the English do not perceive a need for him since democracy in England had not been carried to the same extremes that it had been on the European continent (xvi). That is, while many of the concepts central to modern democracy, such as individual liberty, parliamentary institutions, and sovereign rights of the people have their roots in England, Levy claims that the embrace of these ideas have been more fervent abroad than in England itself, referring for instance to the French revolution and the extent to which it undermined traditional structures and institutions of authority (xviii). While Levy neglects to consider how the English Civil Wars might confound his specific characterization of these national differences, Ludovici does take up this aspect of English history, instead importing many of the qualities that Levy assigns to the anarchic French Revolutionaries to English Puritans and Parliamentarians.[13] For Levy, however, the English have remained entirely "sober, exclusive, feudal, and conservative" (xix). Thus, Levy reasons, if Nietzsche's thought may be characterized as a corrective to the nihilistic undermining of

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[13] See section 3.3

authority and tradition unleashed by liberal democracy, and if this revolutionary democratic turn had yet to be fully realized in the English context, then this would explain why the English mind could not fully register the worth of Nietzsche's thought (xix).

However, despite what Levy sees as England's lingering conservative and feudal trappings, he warns that democracy is "like a stream" which "all the people of Europe will have to cross," suggesting first, that liberal democracy is a kind of historical inevitability for the nations of Europe, and second, that this democratic stage should be viewed as only temporary in nature and the telos of European political history is situated somewhere beyond liberal democracy (xix). What this stage of history following democracy would look like is not explicitly articulated in Levy's essay, but according to his descriptions, a country that crosses through and overcomes the stream of democracy would come out "cleaner, healthier, and stronger" (xix). Thus, according to his analysis, the English have been slower to pursue the hygienic cleansing process whereby the nation is purified of its democratic inclinations, suggesting that England lags historically in relation to other nations of the continent (xix). Having been slower to embrace democracy, Levy argues that the English are less equipped to deal with its inevitable consequences, and therefore Nietzsche's thought should be welcomed by the English mind as a prophetic guide to help the English prepare for the democratic decadence that awaits them.

The third reason for the "icy silence" with which Nietzsche has been greeted in England is that England lacks a literary or philosophical tradition which has sufficiently prepared the English mind for his thought. The English thus lack a proper framework for the interpretation of his ideas. As Levy writes, there is "no literary ancestor over here who could have prepared you for him" (xx). Levy does acknowledge one exception to this claim, namely with regards to the

work of Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881), a conservation politician and novelist who Levy believes could help to prepare the English mind for Nietzsche's ideas. According to Levy, this is because both Disraeli and Nietzsche start from the same premise, namely, "the same pessimistic diagnosis of the wild anarchy, the growing melancholy, the threatening Nihilism of Modern Europe" (xxi). Both writers, for Levy, in diagnosing the nihilism of modern Europe, recognize the danger of the age, "behind its big mouthed talk about progress and evolution" (xxi). Further, Levy suggests that both writers, as philosophical diagnosticians, go beyond a Christian diagnosis of sinfulness to instead recognize that this nihilism stems from "weakness," suggesting that both Nietzsche and Disraeli move beyond a moral framework of good and evil to instead posit a framework of value divided between strength and weakness (xxi). Levy, himself a physician, characterizes both writers then as philosophical "doctors" who are concerned with diagnosing the root of European nihilism and proposing a solution which goes beyond the moral universe articulated by a traditionally Christian perspective. According to Levy, nihilism is the "disease of the age," and as such the diagnosticians Nietzsche and Disraeli both seek to elaborate on "the way to health" through overcoming the malaise of their time (xxii). Levy further suggests that Disraeli, like Nietzsche, expressed a "furious enmity against the doctrine of the natural equality of men," suggesting that a further parallel between both writers is their critique of liberal democracy and their association of democracy with nihilism (xxiii). In highlighting these aspects of Disraeli's thought as an exception to the English literary norm, namely the diagnosis of nihilism as a spiritual disease which is conceptually linked to liberal democracy, Levy tries to emphasize an instance of intellectual homology between the English and German "mind" which might help to facilitate the transference of Nietzsche's ideas into the English context.

However, where Nietzsche differs from Disraeli is in his view of Christianity, with Levy claiming that Disraeli "overlooked the narrow connection between Christianity and Democracy" (xxiv). Levy suggests that democracy is related specifically to the "Protestant form" of Christianity, which is "at the root of British Liberalism and individualism to this very day" (xxiv). Further, for Levy, there is a direct continuity between this Protestant form of Christianity and the French Revolution, a continuity Disraeli failed to see, but "which was really a profoundly Christian" moment in its democratic and revolutionary spirit (xxv). Levy's characterization of the French Revolution here corresponds to many counter-revolutionary and conservative accounts of European history, such as the Catholic philosopher Joseph de Maistre, who in his 1798 essay "Reflections on Protestantism in Its Relations to Sovereignty" similarly argued that, "since the time of the Reformation, there has been a spirit of revolt which 'really struggles…against all sovereign powers and especially against monarchies" (130). According to de Maistre's characterizations, Protestantism "submits to nothing," "it believes nothing," and "revolt is its natural state," and thus during the French Revolution, "nothing could extinguish their thirst for Catholic blood and their hatred for the monarchy" (130; 147). The context for Levy's own claim concerning this continuity is explained more in his earlier 1906 work, *The Revival of Aristocracy*, wherein Levy asserts a continuity between the collapse of the Roman empire, caused by "the deluge of Christianity," the "German Revolution, euphemistically baptized the Reformation," and the French Revolution (1). Similar to de Maistre's characterization, the heretics of early Christianity, the peasants and anabaptists of Luther's time, and the Jacobins all corresponded to a principle of anarchy, for Levy, over and against a principle of sovereignty (2). As Levy writes, the anarchism promoted by these different movements consisted in "that condition of feebleness and vacillation and lordlessness that henceforth forbade

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to any people a Roman sovereignty" (2). Thus, while Disraeli fails to consider how this principle of anti-sovereignty corresponds not just to democracy, but also to Protestantism, Nietzsche instead succeeds. For, as Levy writes, Nietzsche, "the descendant of a long line of Protestant Parsons," recognized the "Protestant spirit of anarchy" and sought to overcome this anarchic spirit through the transvaluative reassertion of an aristocratic framework of value ("Nietzsche in England" xxvi). In this context, Levy invokes several religious metaphors, painting himself as an "eager missionary" of Nietzsche's thought, on a "crusade" to prepare the English mind for the reception of Nietzsche's ideas and to sanitize the English mind of its Protestant and Democratic preoccupations (xiii).

The occasion for the translation project which Levy and Ludovici would be embarking on then was what they took to be the nihilism of modern Europe, which as Levy characterizes it, was rooted in the conjunction of English liberal and German Protestant traditions. In his essay "Nietzsche in England," Levy characterizes this phenomenon as having significant political and spiritual stakes which transcend national boundaries, with nihilism referring to a trans-national condition afflicting the European continent and associated with a transitional or intermediate historical stage for which all European nations were destined. However, he also suggests that this condition of nihilism and its overcoming is carried out at the level of the nation-state's individual history, being inflected by the nation's distinct historical velocities and frameworks of meaning, proposing a narrower scale of nihilism particular in some ways to the English context. In referring to a conceptual constellation of spiritual and political malaise rooted in a Protestant form of Christianity and liberal democracy, nihilism thus serves as the rhetorical situation in response to which Levy and Ludovici seek to legitimize a conservative and illiberal framework of value that is characterized by aristocratic conceptions of strength and power, and which they

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wished to articulate specifically on behalf of the English "mind" and its anticipated political destiny.

3.2.2   Ludovici's Nietzsche and the Principle of Elevation

While Levy ultimately assembled several contributors for his project to translate the collected works of Nietzsche into English, including J.M. Kennedy, author of *Tory Democracy* (1911), Thomas Common, and William S. Haussmann, it was "for Ludovici that Levy felt the warmest affection," with Levy thus entrusting Ludovici with "the largest share of the translation work" (Thatcher 237). Beginning with *Thoughts Out of Season* in 1909, Ludovici translated a total of six volumes of Nietzsche's complete works as part of the eighteen-volume project overseen by Levy. In 1910, Ludovici went on to translate *The Will to Power*, which was split into two volumes, and in 1911, he translated *The Case of Wagner*, *The Twilight of the Idols*, and *Ecce Homo*. He further contributed an appendix to *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in 1909, translated by Thomas Common and with an introduction written by Nietzsche's sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, who was eager to promote her brother's work to the English-speaking public. In these translations, Ludovici typically includes his own prefatory essay, with analyses and explanations derived in part from his 1908 lectures, wherein he summarizes what he takes to be the main elements of Nietzsche's thought. In general, the prefaces stress particular themes which tend to echo Levy's characterizations of Nietzsche as outlined above, namely, Nietzsche's criticisms of democracy and his warnings about European nihilism and decadence. In this way, Ludovici's conception of nihilism was developed and refined through his translation of Nietzsche's works and produced in collaboration with Levy, using these prefatory essays and appendixes to outline some of the key problems with which Nietzsche was concerned. Further, Ludovici's translation

of Nietzsche into the English intellectual context would eventually become the basis for his later work as an art critic, especially for the modernist journal, *The New Age*, insofar as he began to see himself as a diagnostician working in the Nietzschean intellectual tradition, diagnosing the nihilism and decadence of the age which Ludovici would go on to claim was reflected in the art of many of his modernist contemporaries. Here I turn to Ludovici's prefatory essays and notes on his translations in order to characterize first his interpretation of Nietzsche's thought, and second to distill the conception of nihilism which Ludovici began to work out in the process of translating Nietzsche into English.

Alongside Levy's essay, "Nietzsche and England," which aimed to outline the purpose and significance of systematically translating Nietzsche's works into English, Ludovici offers his own characterization of Nietzsche's thought in his translator's preface to *Thoughts Out of Season*. As his first official translation of Nietzsche in partnership with Levy, Ludovici's preface briefly outlines what he takes to be Nietzsche's "lifelong ideal" and his "one very definite and unaltered purpose" (xxx). While nihilism is not explicitly mentioned in this preface, Ludovici aims in this text to articulate the fundamental principle for understanding Nietzsche's ideas, which in turn anticipates his conceptualization of nihilism as it is presented in the prefaces and notes of his subsequent translations. It is not the claim of this section that Ludovici is particularly far afield in his characterizations of Nietzsche's thought, but rather that his decision to emphasize certain aspects of Nietzsche, and his open-ended interpretation of some of these aspects, speaks especially to Ludovici's own ideological commitments. In these texts, Ludovici's Nietzsche is figured as the idealized champion of aristocratic virtue, a figure aiming to combat the decay of democratic egalitarianism and anarchy through a reassertion of the need for a pathos of distance, an intellectual aristocrat adeptly balancing Dionysian vitality with formal coherence and

sophistication, and the primary proponent of a countercurrent to Christian slave morality. According to Ludovici, in seeking to overcome the nihilism and decadence of Europe, Nietzsche instead discovers and posits the will to power as a basic principle which underlies all moral systems, politics, artistic creation, and even biological evolution, with Ludovici's stress on this principle undergirding his own advocacy for an aristocratically ordered society, particularly in the context of the English nation.

Throughout all these translations and their prefaces, and as he does in this instance, Ludovici strongly insists upon the systematic coherence of Nietzsche's thought, vehemently opposing any insinuation of disorder, anarchy, or madness in Nietzsche's philosophy, with Ludovici suggesting that Nietzsche's aristocratic form of mastery is reflected in the coherence of his system. In the case of his prefatory essay to *Thoughts Out of Season*, Ludovici is concerned with explaining how it can be that Nietzsche both praised Wagner in his early works and yet characterized him as a symbol of European decadence in his later works. Rather than suggesting a break or a contradiction in his thought, Ludovici insists on a continuity between these two phases of Nietzsche by distilling what he takes to be Nietzsche's "lifelong ideal," explaining that what appears to have been a "*volte face*" in attitude was really the gradual realization that he had mischaracterized Wagner as a representative of this essential principle. Thus, in order to establish this continuity, Ludovici distills a singular principle from Nietzsche's work, which he articulates as follows: "All was good to Nietzsche which tended to elevate man; all was bad that kept man stationary or sent him backwards" (xxx). In choosing to frame this principle in terms of the spatiotemporal difference between a forwards or backwards movement and orientation, Ludovici at once invokes a developmental rhetoric of progress yet at the same time aims to disentangle notions of development from liberal enlightenment notions of equality, asserting like Levy an

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alternative telos which leads beyond the democratic. Ludovici instead insists, broadly, on the reinterpretation of development to mean the preservation and enhancement of power, with notions of decadence, degeneration, or weakness being associated with a regressive or reactive relation to power. In this formula, centered on man's "elevation," Ludovici aims to crystallize the basic thought of Nietzsche, with Ludovici taking advantage of the ambiguity of the idea of elevation to argue that Nietzsche's beliefs concerning morality, biology, and sociology were all principally oriented towards this goal of "elevation," a goal which could only be upheld within an aristocratically structured society.

That same year, Thomas Common's (1850-1919) translation of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* was published in English, likewise edited by Levy. This 1909 edition included an appendix written by Ludovici in which he aims to interpret and explain the text's various parables and allegories to the reader. In these notes, Ludovici further expands on the principle that he distilled in his notes from *Thoughts Out of Season* in order to show how this ideal of elevation informs various aspects of Nietzsche's thought as well as to gesture towards a conception of nihilism which is specifically rooted in this idea. Ludovici's "Notes on 'Thus Spake Zarathustra'" are addressed to the student of Nietzsche, who Ludovici claims often mistakenly believe that Nietzsche had no systematic philosophy and miscasts Nietzsche as a kind of philosophical anarchist, a characterization to which Ludovici, like his collaborator Levy, is strongly opposed. Referring to section 1 of Nietzsche's text, "The Three Metamorphoses," Ludovici stresses in his interpretation that "Nietzsche, the supposed anarchist, here plainly disclaims all relationship whatever to anarchy…" (413). Ludovici instead wishes to once more stress the aristocratic dimension of Nietzsche's thought by insisting on the unity of Nietzsche's overall philosophy, claiming that Nietzsche's principle of elevation as it was distilled in the translator's note for

Thoughts Out of Season serves as the bedrock for Nietzsche's various texts. Ludovici's distillation of Nietzsche's system is broken down into four components, which all flow out of the basic principle of elevation that Ludovici highlighted in *Thoughts Out of Season*. The components are: (a.) Nietzsche and morality; (b.) The distinction between master and slave morality; (c.) Nietzsche and evolution; (d.) Nietzsche and sociology.

With regards to (a.) Nietzsche and morality, Ludovici posits that Nietzsche's conception of morality is premised on a belief in moral relativism, that is, that there are no absolute conceptions of good and evil, and instead that moral concepts are wielded situationally as a means for maintaining or enhancing one's power in the world (408). What is good then is not rooted in a static moral conception, but only in that which enhances one's power, with Ludovici here glossing Nietzsche's argument from *Genealogy of Morals.* Further, this interpretation corresponds to the basic "ideal" that Ludovici had emphasized in his notes for *Thoughts Out of Season,* i.e., that what is good is what elevates man, with elevation is this context being interpreted as the preservation and enhancement of one's power. As Ludovici characterizes it, according to this view, Christian moral conceptions of good and evil conceal their true purpose as "expedients for acquiring power," and thus in regards to the Christian moral universe specifically, morals are actually the means by which the Christian type can preserve or enhance their power, or at the very least defend against the power of others (408-409).

Ludovici continues to gloss Nietzsche's argument from *Genealogy of Morals* in order to next articulate (b.) a distinction between forms of slave and master morality. Ludovici elaborates on this distinction by characterizing a noble form of morality as "active" and creative in orientation, and a slave morality as "passive" and defensive in orientation (410). In the case of a noble or master morality, according to Ludovici, all is good which "proceeds from strength,

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power, health, well-constitutedness, happiness, and awfulness" and such morality is driven by the struggle for power (410). In the case of slave morality, on the other hand, good simply refers to that which alleviates suffering, and thus this mode of morality emphasizes values like pity, patience, and humility insofar as they make life "endurable" to one of this class and assist one with the "struggle for existence" (410). To members of this class, all that is powerful is "bad," and thus virtues such as "strength, health, superabundance of animal spirits and power" are regarded with hatred and suspicion (410). If Ludovici insists that the basic ideal of Nietzsche's thought is that all is good which elevates man, in this context he is referring specifically to this form of master morality which is creative and active in character. For as Ludovici describes it, slave morality does not elevate man but merely allows him to endure, and being passive and defensive in orientation this has "led to degeneration" (411). In his outline of Nietzsche's system, Ludovici stresses then that the phenomenon of "degeneration" is rooted in this form of slave morality, which is passive, defensive, and limited to the struggle for existence, with Nietzsche instead advocating for a noble-morality which aims to "elevate" those who are oriented towards a form of action and creation (411). In this way Ludovici's characterization of Nietzsche aligns with Lewis's in a certain sense, who had cast Nietzsche as a member of the "action school" of philosophy, only for Lewis this was interpreted as a form of nihilism whereas for Ludovici it signals the path towards nihilism's overcoming.

Next, (c.) Ludovici moves on to a discussion of Nietzsche as "evolutionist," with Ludovici suggesting in this passage that the notion of degeneration does not just have historical or cultural implications but also biological implications (411). According to Ludovici, Nietzsche accepted the "developmental hypothesis" of naturalists as an explanation for the origin of species, referring in this case generally to the theories of Darwin and Spencer (411). For

Ludovici, Nietzsche's thought accords with these ideas insofar as he did not regard man as the highest being in which evolution culminated, and instead saw that man's mental and spiritual attributes are in a state of development (411). That is, if the origin of man is rooted in a continual state of becoming, and "process be a fact," then there are theoretically "no limits" to man's aspirations. Once more then, as in his preface in *Thoughts Out of Season*, Ludovici insists on a notion of development understood not as a democratic expansion of rights and a movement towards social equality, but rather in the overturning of limits through the preservation and enhancement of power, only in this instance he transfers this notion of the development of power to the context of evolutionary development. Ludovici thus suggests that, according to Nietzsche's principle of elevation, man's ideal should be to develop not just morally but biologically into the Superman (*Übermensch*) (411). As Ludovici writes, "If he struggled up from barbarism, and still more remotely from the lower Primates, his ideal should be to surpass man himself and reach Superman" (411).

As Ludovici characterizes it, evolutionary struggle is only a "secondary activity" that is reactive in nature, with Nietzsche viewing the mere struggle for existence as a "passive and involuntary condition" (439). Thus, according to Ludovici, where Nietzsche disagrees with Spencer, and to a lesser degree Darwin, is Nietzsche's insistence that this evolutionary process is not simply a struggle for existence, but rather a struggle for power, with Ludovici stressing the capacity of humanity to actively affect evolutionary trajectories. As Ludovici suggests, Nietzsche's principle of the "elevation" of man does not refer simply to the struggle for power at the scale of particular moral or cultural conflicts but also at the evolutionary and biological level (439). Though the precise relation remains ambiguous in this passage, Ludovici is strongly insistent on the interpenetration of the moral and the biological, insofar as one's moral

"environment" can serve as the setting in relation to which evolutionary struggle occurs. According to Ludovici, this relation is what then warrants Nietzsche's insistence on an aristocratic form of society, insofar as Nietzsche views the aristocracy as an "elevating" or ascending social formation that facilitates *both* social and evolutionary progress, with progress referring to the preservation and enhancement of power and the concomitant emergence of a superior species of man (440). As one might surmise, Ludovici's insistence on a relation between the enhancement of social power via the subjugation of the weak by the strong, and a form of biological development at the level of evolutionary struggle, dangerously anticipates his later advocacy for forms of eugenics while also informing his conservative political commitments.[14]

Lastly, as Ludovici frames it, (d.) Nietzsche's philosophy also contains a sociological dimension, which once more is informed by Nietzsche's principle of "elevation" and which follows from Ludovici's characterizations of morality and evolution. Echoing Levy's characterization of Nietzsche, Ludovici argues that Nietzsche rejected aspects of Enlightenment thought which were grounded on a principle of equality amongst men, instead insisting on the need for an "aristocratic arrangement of society" in order to counteract processes of degeneration (411). Only an aristocratic arrangement, according to Ludovici, would allow society to "rear an ideal race," with Ludovici once more equivocating between biological and sociological conceptions of degeneration in order to posit an alternative societal configuration grounded on principles of strength, action, and creativity, attributes which Ludovici ascribes to master forms of morality (411). This aristocratic arrangement, as Ludovici puts it, would instead insist that "Men are not equal," and so for him the positing of a hierarchical structure divided between the strong and weak is needed in order to orient society towards the principle of elevation,

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[14] For a more detailed examination of this aspect of Ludovici's thought, see Dan Stone's *Breeding Superman: Race and Eugenics in Edwardian and Interwar Britain* (2002).

understood as the heightening of power, over and against the flattening and degenerative aims of liberal democratic political arrangements. Thus, if the basic principle of Nietzsche's thought is concerned with the elevation of man, as Ludovici put it, this elevation is contingent not just on an individual moral philosophy, but on the construction of an aristocratic society premised on the difference in worth between human beings. Although Ludovici only writes about society in a general sense here, it is worth recalling that the original occasion for his and Levy's translation project was specifically the spread of European nihilism to England. Thus, although Ludovici only writes in a general sense here, the broader context of his project would suggest that he is thinking more specifically at the scale of the English nation in his advocacy for this aristocratic form of society.

Having described this "system," which heavily emphasizes the aristocratic dimension of Nietzsche's thought while insisting on a relation between moral and evolutionary struggle, Ludovici then aims to explain certain allegories and parables from *Thus Spake Zarathustra* through this interpretive framework that he has developed. Notably, Ludovici's interpretation of section XV of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, "The Thousand and One Goals," makes reference to a concept of nihilism in relation to this framework. Here Ludovici writes: "In the penultimate verse he makes known his discovery concerning the root of modern Nihilism and indifference, —i.e. that modern man has no goal, no aim, no ideals (See Note A)" (414), with Ludovici here referring the reader back to note (a.), that is, his remarks on Nietzsche and morality. Ludovici's characterization of Nietzsche here is not off the mark in claiming that nihilism corresponds with the dissipation of goals or lack of aim for Nietzsche, but the context in which it is being interpreted helps to disclose Ludovici's own understanding of the concept. In the section itself, Nietzsche doesn't mention nihilism as such, but rather recounts the travels of Zarathustra, who

through observing various cultures comes to realize both the relativity of all moral systems, and yet as the same time that all cultures have a formal conception of good and bad. For Zarathustra, this both reveals the doctrine of relative morality, and the realization that humans create their own values, rather than values being derived from a supersensible realm. Ludovici stresses in his notes that this situation of a thousand and one goals results in a form of nihilism, characterized by the absence of direction or purpose. For, from the standpoint of a slave or herd morality—a morality that is passive, defensive, or reactive in nature, as Ludovici outlined in notes (a.) and (b.) of his preface—the loss of uppermost values derived from a supersensible realm leads to both the proliferation of goals and the dissipation of singular aim or goal by which a society can orient itself. According to Ludovici's interpretation of Nietzsche, as long as a form of herd morality is dominant as opposed to a noble morality which is active and creative, a society will be unable to re-establish orienting values for itself and will be left to thrash about in this directionless nihilism.

For Ludovici then, nihilism in this text refers first to lack of aim or goal, but this aimlessness is rooted principally in a herd or slave form of morality which Ludovici aligns specifically with Christianity and democracy. As Ludovici goes on to emphasize, "What Nietzsche strives to combat and overthrow is the modern democratic tendency which is slowly labouring to level all things" (415). For Ludovici, a recognition of the doctrine of moral relativism from within this tendency of democratic leveling leaves one without a capacity to assert a singular goal or aim, as all goals or aims are flattened and made equal, or as Nietzsche puts it, this process terminates in a thousand and one goals, thus inducing a directionless nihilism.

The significance of Ludovici's insistence on the systematic coherence between all of Nietzsche's thought thus becomes clearer in light of his characterization of nihilism in these notes. As has been noted, Ludovici's insistence throughout all of these prefaces is that Nietzsche himself has one basic ideal or principle, a goal that democratic social formations cannot conjure for themselves, namely the goal or principle of elevation. Ludovici's defense of the systematic coherency of Nietzsche's thought by repeatedly insisting on the rootedness of Nietzsche's thought in this singular goal of elevation can therefore be linked to Ludovici's understanding of nihilism as the proliferation of goals to the point of aimlessness via a democratic leveling process. Ludovici's insistence that Nietzsche's entire body of thought is oriented around the singular goal of elevation is crucial for the portrait that Ludovici wishes to paint, insofar as this systematic coherency serves as the very evidence that Nietzsche was able to overcomes the nihilistic situation of a "thousand and one goals" through the disavowal of democratic multiplicity and its aversion to the strong and powerful by instead asserting a singular goal of elevation, i.e., the preservation and enhancement of power. It is therefore crucial to Ludovici's project, and Levy's for that matter as well, to insist on the systematic coherency of Nietzsche's works—insofar as they flow out of this basic goal of elevation—in order to maintain an image of Nietzsche as the philosopher of the aristocratic, over and against an image of Nietzsche as mad man, anarchist, ruminator, or as one whose thought might simply be characterized by breaks, retractions, and ambiguities.

In 1910, the year following Ludovici's notes on *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Ludovici further contributes to Levy's project to systematically translate Nietzsche into English through his translation of *The Will to Power*, published in two volumes. In his preface to the first volume, Ludovici explains how the various subdivisions of Nietzsche's text, which consists of a

collection of scattered and fragmented notes for a work that was never completed, are

nonetheless still unified insofar as they are all rooted in Nietzsche's basic principle, the "Will to

Power." According to Ludovici, Nietzsche held the will to power "to be the essential factor of all

existence," with this principle therefore underlying the text's disparate comments on art,

morality, politics, ect. (ix). In this case then, due to the textually fragmented nature of

Nietzsche's incomplete work, Ludovici's aim in his preface is to show how, despite the text's

disjointedness, it nevertheless still exhibits the same form of coherence exhibited by Nietzsche's

other works and is continuous with them insofar as the text is rooted in the basic principle of

elevation, only here this principle is explicitly named as the will to power.

In his preface to volume 1 of *The Will to Power*, Ludovici suggests that Nietzsche's

understanding of this principle derives from a personal experience he had while on the

battlefield, a stress which is intended to further emphasize the anti-democratic dimension of

Nietzsche's thought. In his preface, Ludovici shares an anecdote that Nietzsche himself likely did

not actually recount, but rather his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, in which it is claimed that

in observing a formation of charging soldiers on the battlefield Nietzsche was "struck with the

thought that the highest will to live could not find its expression in a miserable 'struggle for

existence,'" here referring back to Spencer's characterization of evolution, but rather in "a will to

war, a Will to Power, a will to overpower!" (x). Kaufmann points out that Nietzsche did not write

explicitly of a will to power until ten years later, and that the characterization of this event is

more "in tune with his sister's nationalism and feminine enthusiasms for uniforms," indicating

that the claim a concept of the will to power appeared "full grown" to Nietzsche in this moment

is probably apocryphal (179). Nevertheless, Ludovici chooses to center his preface around this

anecdote, claiming that Nietzsche was struck by the concept of the will to power when he

witnessed a cavalry formation passing him by "on its way and perhaps to death —so wonderful in its vital strength and formidable courage, and so perfectly symbolic of a race that *will* conquer and prevail, or perish in the attempt" (x). Ludovici's suggestion by way of Förster-Nietzsche's anecdote is that the essential character of Nietzsche's principle of elevation, named here as the will to power, can be evidenced by acts of war, insofar as they symbolize a mode of collective sacrifice organized around the mutual aim of overpowering and negating an enemy's existence.

Ludovici concludes from this story that Nietzsche must have derived his basic principle of elevation through observing attributes such as strength, action, and the collective aim to overpower an enemy which were symbolically concentrated in that moment of war. Further, Ludovici emphasizes a specific form of collectivity in the example, on the formation of multiple soldiers acting in concert and which is constituted through the shared aim of negating an enemy force in a moment of nationalistic sacrifice. Ludovici's interpretation frames this moment as the antithesis to the nihilistic situation of the "thousand and one goals," which he had linked to democratic social formations and to herd or slave moralities more generally, for the situation recounts the shared embodiment of a singular aim in relation to which this collective orients itself, namely the aim to overpower an enemy. Ludovici's suggestion then through his interpretation of this anecdote is that the situation of war reveals the environment in which aristocratic virtues of strength and action can be realized. It is through observing this specific form of collectivity in war that Nietzsche then supposedly derives his idea of the will to power, which as Ludovici reiterates, is "at the root of all his philosophy" and which Nietzsche in turn held "to be the essential factor of all existence" (x, ix).

Ludovici immediately follows this romantic characterizations of nationalistic war with a reference to nihilism, with Ludovici implicitly contrasting Nietzsche's experience on the

battlefield with the situation of nihilism. While Ludovici had characterized nihilism primarily as

a lack of aim or goal in his notes on *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, linking this condition to democratic

social arrangements, Ludovici goes on to stress in this text that a lack of aim or goal is the

outcome specifically of Christian values. As Ludovici writes, admitting to the textual

disjointedness of Nietzsche's work due its incompletion, it is still nonetheless "deeply

interesting" insofar as the first part of the work "attempts to trace the elements of Nihilism—as

the outcome of Christian values—in all of the institutions of the present day" (xii). Ludovici's

concept of nihilism is here thought once more in terms of the Nietzschean distinction between a

slave and master morality, with Ludovici aligning a Christian framework of value with the

former, and an ethos of militarism and collective national sacrifice with the later. If a Christian

slave morality is passive and defensive in its relation to power, as Ludovici characterized it in his

notes on *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, then this can be contrasted with the collectivity of the charging

cavalry formation which, according to Ludovici's reading, in aiming to actively overpower its

enemy, comes to symbolically embody the will to power. Nietzsche himself had acknowledged

that one consequence of European nihilism, as the dissolution of the belief in a supra-sensible

realm of meaning, could be a re-investment of meaning in notions of race and the nation, thus

creating the conditions for nationalistic war.[15] According to Ludovici's reading, however, a state

of war and militarism as the cultivation of a collective will to overpower an enemy is not so

much a consequence of this nihilism, but instead symbolically crystallizes a counter current to

the situation of nihilism that is rooted in Christianity and modern democratic institutions insofar

as it discloses an alternative moral environment that favors an active relationship to power,

namely in the collective will to overpower an enemy. In other words, according to Ludovici's

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[15] See Stefan Elbe's "'Labyrinths of the Future': Nietzsche's Genealogy of European Nationalism" for a more detailed analysis of this topic as it appears in Nietzsche's work.

reading of Förster-Nietzsche's anecdote, nationalistic war and a spirit of militarism do not signal the consummation of nihilism but rather the possibility of nihilism's overcoming, a possible turning point in the continual state of war between slave and master moralities that Ludovici thematized in his 1908 lectures.

Despite the fragmentary nature of Nietzsche's work, Ludovici concludes that *The Will to Power* retains its unity with Nietzsche's earlier texts, with this reading further supporting Ludovici's characterization of Nietzsche as a man who was able to overcome the situation of the thousand and one goals. For, according to Ludovici's argument, Nietzsche once more stands firmly "in favor of exceptional men," suggesting that this type of person could be realized in moments of nationalistic sacrifice. For Ludovici, Nietzsche's *The Will to Power* is not evidence then of an incomplete or incoherent system of thought for, despite its fragmentariness, the thought which underlies the work is rooted in the unifying principle of elevation meant to counteract a situation of nihilism.

Published the following year in 1911, Ludovici's preface to *The Case of Wagner* shifts from an explicit discussion of nihilism to the related concept of decadence, particularly as it is reflected in art. Ludovici's characterization of aesthetics and its relation to a decadent European modernity is notable insofar as it anticipates his writings as an art critic for Alfred Orage's journal, *The New Age*, wherein Ludovici's framework for aesthetic judgment revolves around a "diagnosis" of the decadence exhibited in a particular artwork. As Ludovici writes, "Nietzsche was one of the first to recognize that the principles of art are inextricably bound up with the laws of life, that an aesthetic dogma may therefore promote or depress all vital forces, and that a picture, a symphony, a poem or a statue, is just as capable of being pessimistic, anarchic, Christian or revolutionary, as a philosophy or science is" (xii). According to Ludovici then, if a

given aesthetic work can be interpreted in terms of its rootedness in a "pessimistic" or "anarchic" will, then Nietzsche in turn aimed to discover a mode of aesthetic creation which promoted an alternative morphology of the will, capable of counteracting this pessimism, anarchism, and decadence (xii). Thus, in distinction from certain modernists such as Wyndham Lewis, who called for a principle of aesthetic autonomy that preserved the intellect as the place of creative freedom over and against the will, Ludovici's mode of aesthetic judgment as he derives it from Nietzsche instead presupposes that the will is at the origin of an artwork's creation, and that aesthetic criticism should in turn be focused on an evaluation of modality of the will which informs the creation of a given work of art.

Second, reiterating a point he had made several years earlier in his preface to *Thoughts Out of Season*, Ludovici's preface to *The Case of Wagner* once more stresses that Nietzsche's turn away from Wagner does not signal a change in Nietzsche's overall project or aim, as oriented towards a principle of elevation, but rather it should be interpreted as a reappraisal of Wagnerism as the wrong aesthetic mode through which that aim of elevation can be achieved. For Ludovici, Nietzsche was not overly concerned with Wagner's person so much as the underlying morphology of the will which informed Wagnersism. That is, according to Ludovici's interpretation, "Wagner" is deployed by Nietzsche as a shorthand meant to "personify the general decadence of modern ideas, values aspirations, and Art" and the "spiritual disease" of Nietzsche's time (xi; xxiv). Ludovici once more insists on the coherence and singularity of Nietzsche's guiding principle of elevation, with that principle here being articulated in response to the decadence of Wagnerism. For Ludovici, Nietzsche's "break" with Wagner should be interpreted as Nietzsche's realization that he had misaligned Wagner with a principle of elevation capable of overcoming European decadence. Thus, as Ludovici explains, it is not that

Nietzsche's own thought transitioned from pessimism and anarchism to an aristocratic philosophy of the will to power, but rather he eventually realized that Wagnerism was not conducive to the latter. Ludovici gestures once more then towards the systematic coherence of Nietzsche's work so as to uphold an image of him as an exception figure who overcame the situation of the thousand and one goals by way of his principle of elevation.

Ludovici's preface to his translation of *Twilight of the Idols*, also published in 1911, elaborates on the relation between nihilism and Christianity which he had thematized in his notes on *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and his preface to *The Case of Wagner*. As Ludovici explains it, Nietzsche's evaluation of different religions is not related to the veracity of a particular religious doctrine but rather the extent to which the doctrine enhances or denies life. Along these lines, Ludovici reinvokes the opposition between the aimlessness of nihilism versus Nietzsche's principle of elevation, only here he reframes this contrast in terms of a vitalist rhetoric of the denial of life versus the enhancement of life. According to Ludovici's reading, Nietzsche did not believe in absolute truth, and thus "truth" is merely the name Nietzsche gives to illusions which allows a species to prevail. In this way, questions of good and bad in the realm of ethics and truth and falsity in the realm of epistemology are reduced to a more basic question of whatever most elevates life (xii). To recall, Joseph Conrad grappled with a similar question in his discussion of Singleton, wherein he expressed a concern less for the veracity of a particular discourse and more so for the capacity of a discourse to effectively conceal more terrible insights into a kind of cosmic meaninglessness. In Conrad's case, however, these illusions serve more of a defensive purpose, protecting the person from the possibility of a more terrible insight, whereas in Ludovici's reading of Nietzsche, there are *only* illusions, and the way to differentiate between these illusions is primarily in their capacity to enhance or deny life. Thus, Nietzsche's objection

to the Christian illusion is not rooted in his belief that it is a lie as such or that it can be easily disproven, but rather that it is a lie that is hostile to life insofar as it does not promote a principle of elevation and a master form of morality (xiii).

In this context, Ludovici specifically stresses aphorism 56 of *The Antichrist*, which as he paraphrases it, indicates that Christianity for Nietzsche belongs to a class of "nihilistic religions" (xiii). As Ludovici goes on to define it, this classification refers to "religions which deny life" (xiii). The concept of nihilism as it is ascribed to Christianity refers in this case then to the denial of life, a situation which leads to "effeminacy and decay" rather than a "strong and noble type of man" (x, xiv). Instead, as a corrective to this form of nihilism, Ludovici concludes that Nietzsche's followers will have to implement the type of society which Nietzsche describes in aphorism 57 of *The Antichrist*. While Ludovici ends his preface on this note, without actually disclosing what it is about this aphorism that he sees worth implementing, the aphorism in question revolves around the claim that a "healthy" society will involve a differentiation between castes and an inequality of rights. For this reason, Nietzsche claims that the Christian and anarchist, who oppose this form of society, can be linked in their "pessimistic look" and in their moral hatred for "everything that stands erect" (218, 222). According to Ludovici's stress then, which asserts a direct relationship between aphorism 56 and 57 of Nietzsche's text, nihilism as the denial of life directly corresponds to an anarchic hatred of aristocratically ordered societies, echoing Levy's characterization of nihilism in *The Revival of Aristocracy*.

Ludovici's final translation for Levy's project was *Ecce Homo*, the last prose work that Nietzsche wrote. In Ludovici's preface for this work, it is not the fragmented nature of the text which he contends with, but rather the perception that this last autobiographical work is evidence of Nietzsche's descent into madness. According to Ludovici, the typical interpretation of *Ecce*

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Homo views the work's outlandish and egoistic titles such as "Why I Write Such Excellent Books" as reflective of Nietzsche's loosening grip on reality. For Ludovici, however, this type of interpretation does not reflect Nietzsche's own pathology so much as the pathology of his readers, whose capacity for evaluating Nietzsche's philosophy is warped by their democratic worldview. As Ludovici writes, the titles of Nietzsche's work "only appear pathological in a democratic age when people have lost all sense of gradation and rank, and in which the virtues of modesty and humility have to be preached far and wide as a corrective against the vulgar pretensions of thousands of wretched nobodies" (viii). Instead, then, Ludovici casts the work as entirely lucid and continuous with Nietzsche's earlier works insofar as it once more performatively adheres to an aristocratic principle of elevation, which Ludovici positions in opposition to "pessimists, nihilists, anarchists, Christians, and other decadents" (xii).

In this respect, Ludovici concludes, Nietzsche can be likened to the "profound thinker" Benjamin Disraeli, reinvoking the intellectual homology which Levy had suggested in his opening essay from *Thoughts Out of Season,* because Disraeli and Nietzsche both experienced a "dangerous breakdown" in their attempted transvaluation of all values. The difference however, as Ludovici writes, is that Nietzsche "actually accomplished" a transvaluation of values through his unified and highly ordered articulation of the principle of elevation (xiii-xiv).

In setting out to translate the collected works of Nietzsche into English, Levy and Ludovici sought not just to translate Nietzsche's texts but to translate specifically his conception of an aristocratic or noble morality into an English context, a task which according to Levy was necessary due to the "threatening Nihilism of modern Europe." If nihilism marked the occasion for the translation of Nietzsche into English for these writers, Ludovici went on then to distill this very concept from Nietzsche's works for his readers so that they could understand the need,

as he saw it, for the transvaluative reassertion of a new framework of value capable of overcoming nihilism, specifically as it corresponds to the threat of rising democracy. To put it another way, the aim of their project was to translate what they saw as the philosophical basis for the legitimization of an aristocratic and illiberal framework of value. For this reason, the concept of nihilism is threaded through Ludovici's various notes and prefaces, a concept derived in this case from Nietzsche but also inflected in such a way that it can support the overall aim of his and Levy's project. Nihilism through these notes and prefaces is characterized as a situation of aimlessness, a denial of life, and a passive or defensive relation to power, qualities which correspond to the moralities of Christianity and democracy. Further, throughout these texts, there is an emphasis on systematicity, which was first carried out at the level of the project itself, expressed as the pressing need to translate Nietzsche's works into one unified collection. This was seen as necessary, however, precisely because Levy and Ludovici insisted on the systematic coherence of Nietzsche's thought itself, claiming that Nietzsche's philosophy flows out of the basic goal of elevation and the transvaluative reassertion of an aristocratic framework of value, thus upholding Nietzsche as himself an example of the aristocratic strength, action, and creativity which would be necessary for overcoming the threat of nihilism.

3.3 Ludovici's Transposition of Nihilism to an English Context

Ludovici's distillation of the concept of nihilism from Nietzsche informed his work immediately following his translations, including both his first book which was not centered on Nietzsche, *The Defense of Aristocracy* (1915), as well as his art criticism for the modernist journal, *The New Age*. This section considers Ludovici's framing of English history as well as some of his contributions to *The New Age* in order to further clarify the origin and scale of

Ludovici's concept of nihilism, tracing how he transposed the concept as it was distilled from Nietzsche to both early modern and English modernist contexts. Although Ludovici moves between different scales of nihilism, this section turns to Ludovici's book and articles from the period immediately following his Nietzsche translations to suggest that, for him, there was a form of nihilism which was particular to England, and thus national in scale. For Ludovici, this English nihilism is rooted doubly in the overthrow of Charles I's rule and in the spread of a Puritan ethos, with Ludovici arguing that these events prefigured the nihilistic aesthetics of his modernist contemporaries. For Ludovici, the Puritan form of Protestantism represents a passive and resentful attitude towards the principle of elevation and life more generally, an ascetic disciplining of the body which serves as the precondition of the proliferation of an English commercial morality, and a turn away from a paternal aristocratic social arrangement that historically served to reign in commercial and democratic aimlessness. In this way, through his distillation of the concept of nihilism from Nietzsche and his subsequent transposition of that concept's qualities to English history, Ludovici presents a third type of nihilism which is distinct from Conrad's and Lewis's deployments of the concept.

3.3.1 Ludovici's Defense of Aristocracy: The English Civil Wars as the Origin of Modern Nihilism

Ludovici's 1915 book, *A Defense of Aristocracy,* thematizes English historical decline, the origin of which he situates in relation to the English Civil Wars and its consequences. As Ludovici describes it in his preface, the aim of his work is to articulate a theory of aristocracy as a solution to "modern problems" of decline, referring in this instance to "the deep discontent prevailing in the modern world, and of the increasing unhappiness of all classes in Western

Europe," going so far as to claim that, in response to this situation, "Aristocracy means life" and "Democracy means death" (vii-ix). In his work, Ludovici dedicates two chapters to the topic of the English Civil Wars, with his characterization of this event suggesting a continuity between his concept of nihilism as it was distilled from Nietzsche and this specific "turning point" in English history. Ludovici locates the origin of the decline which characterizes "Western Europe" in English history, specifically, indicating that for him the more general decadence of Western Europe is rooted in this English origin. Notably then, Ludovici takes Levy's original characterization of nihilism even further: whereas Levy had argued that England was historically lagging in relation to European democracy and so had yet to fully encounter the same threat of nihilism, in Ludovici's text, he reframes England as the origin and locus of nihilism. In this way, a nihilism which was principally European in scale for Nietzsche, Levy, and even Lewis is recast by Ludovici as emerging out of this event in English history, marking a key moment in Ludovici's transposition of the concept of nihilism to an English context.

In his text, Ludovici argues that the murder of Charles I represents a historical turning point wherein the decadent herd moralities of democracy, English commercialism, and Puritanism were unleashed, preparing the way for modern nihilism. As he writes in his preface, "the act of murder committed in 1649 may be regarded as a decisive turning-point in the fortunes of the English people, and a choice of roads which has undoubtedly led to all the evils concerning the origin of which most of us are now consciously or unconscious inquiring" (ix). For Ludovici, the English Civil Wars was a turning point in English history because it unleashed a new framework of value characterized by a denial of life, aimlessness, and an overall lack of health. As Ludovici writes, Charles I "fought for a cause very much more vital and more fundamental than that of despotism. He fought for the cause of flourishing life against the

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growing, but already powerful forces of modern capitalistic trade, of democracy, and of mere quantity as distinct from quality" (105). Recalling his interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy, Ludovici claims that Charles I made a stand against "everything which to-day makes life so ugly, so wretched, so spiritless and so unhealthy," arguing that the rule of Charles I corresponded to an aristocratic morality that favored a vitalistic flourishing of life and fostered the emergence of exceptional men (165). Parliamentarism, by contrast, undermined this framework of value by subjecting a king to the law of the people and ordering Charles I's execution, marking the transition from a noble to a herd morality. As Ludovici explicitly writes, "The triumph of Parliament did not mean the triumph of the liberties of the people. It meant the triumph of a new morality, a new outlook on life, and a new understanding of what life was worth," with Ludovici here reinvoking the association of democracy with nihilism that both Levy and he had thematized in their earlier works on Nietzsche, only transposing that association specifically to English parliamentarism and the English Civil Wars (161-162). While Ludovici had cast all of human history as an ongoing war between slave and master moralities in his 1908 lectures, implying the potential for a much broader scale of nihilism, in this text he specifically casts the English Civil Wars as the turning point in the historical unfolding of this conflict, suggesting that for him this event prepared the way for modern nihilism.

Continuing on, Ludovici explains why he thinks that modern decline is rooted not just in English parliamentarism but also in Puritanism, here transposing nihilism's general link to Christianity that he emphasized in his translation of Nietzsche to specifically Protestantism's "most negative form" ("Cant at the Tate Gallery" 404). In this chapter, Ludovici offers a critique of English capitalism, only it is articulated from his Nietzschean aristocratic standpoint rather than a socialist standpoint. For Ludovici, the English "Puritanical Traders," who aimed to

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transform England into a "capitalistic, commercial, and factory ridden country" after the English

Civil Wars needed the population of the British Isles to be "depressed, reduced in body and

spirit, rendered pusillanimous, weak, servile" (*A Defense of Aristocracy* 172). According to

Ludovici, this condition was achieved through the practice of Puritan asceticism, whereby "their

highest aspirations be towards asceticism" and their bodies "be converted into machines" (172).

Ludovici thus asserts that a capitalistic commercial morality is "united with the morality of

Puritanism," suggesting that a certain Puritan work ethic was the precondition for the success of

capitalism in England (183). Paraphrasing a "certain well know German philosopher" who is left

unnamed, Ludovici goes on to explain that the cultivation of this ascetic attitude was partially

orchestrated as a "masterstroke of *English* instinct" through the performance of Puritan church

service, which was designed to be so tedious, long-winded, and technical that the Englishman

"unconsciously hankers for his work and week-day again" (qtd. in Ludovici 189). The quote

which Ludovici provides in this case, attributed to an unnamed German philosopher and lacking

a citation, derives from *Beyond Good and Evil*, likely from Helen Zimmern's translation, which

was one of the translations included in the collected works of Nietzsche edited by Levy.[16] In this

way, Ludovici highlights Nietzsche's own observations of English Puritanism and a distinct

English "*instinct*" to validate his claim that Puritanism was a precondition of English decadence

and decline. Further, as will be shown, Ludovici's characterization of Puritan church services as

"tedious and colourless" and overly technical directly corresponds to his characterization of the

aesthetic technique of many modern artists, with Ludovici suggesting in this way that a Puritan

ethos prefigures a modern aesthetic nihilism (189).

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[16] On pg. 109 of Zimmern's translation, she translates the sentence almost identically to Ludovici's quote, except with one difference: "It was a master stroke of *English* instinct to hallow and begloom Sunday to such an extent that the Englishman unconsciously hankers for his week- and work-day again," the only difference being that "week" and "work day" are inverted in order by Ludovici, suggesting a possible transcription error on his part.

While Puritanism became an organized and powerful force in the seventeenth-century England, Ludovici also claims that the Puritan archetype "has always existed sporadically, individually and locally, just as sick animals represent a certain percentage of all the animals born every year" (177). This characterization of Puritanism as both a historical movement and an ahistorical archetype corresponding to a decadent morphology of the will is possible because, as was stated, Ludovici views all of human history as a continuous war between two competing moral frameworks of master and slave moralities. Thus, the English Civil Wars marks a critical turning point in English history wherein a herd morality became ascendent, elevating the Puritan archetype. This Puritan archetype is specifically characterized by "ill-health," a "state of disharmony, discord, violent disunion or anarchy of the passions," a suspicion of flourishing and robust life, and an indifference or antagonism to beauty (177). In this way, the Puritan archetype crystallizes everything that Ludovici's Nietzsche supposedly sought to overcome. Namely, while the Puritan archetype is fundamentally characterized by the disharmony and even anarchy of the passions, Nietzsche, by contrast, was upheld as an aristocratic thinker precisely because of the systematic unity of his thought and his unflagging commitment to the principle of elevation, which according to Ludovici, suffuses even his most fragmented and formally disorganized texts. For Ludovici, this unity served as evidence that Nietzsche was of the aristocratic type, over and against the Puritan archetype as he describes it in this text, or the anarchic archetype that Levy warned about in *The Revival of Aristocracy*.

Ludovici's distinct concept of nihilism is not limited to this early modern English context. Rather, he argued elsewhere that the condition of nihilism unleashed by the English Civil Wars, in which the instinctual herd morality of the English became ascendent and supplanted an aristocratic framework of value, should be understood as continuous with the decline and

nihilism of *modern* England. As he writes, when he sees the "harsh, ugly, unhealthy, vulgar, nervous, and spiritless life of modern times…it seems to me by no means extravagant or even fantastic to suppose that at this present moment we are witnessing the final unfolding of the bloom, the finest flower and the most perfect product of that religion…seventeenth-century Puritanism" (236). In this way, invoking a metaphor of the "bloom" and flowering of modern society, Ludovici suggests that modern English society as well as the work of his modernist contemporaries are continuous with the core qualities of nihilism, qualities which he distilled from his earlier translations of Nietzsche and then recast as specifically English in origin and scale.

3.3.2   Tropical Puritanism and The Bloom of Nihilism

The "bloom" of English nihilism as it came to manifest itself in modernist aesthetics is a topic which Ludovici develops specifically in his criticism in *The New Age*. *The New Age* (1907-1922) was a weekly magazine edited by Alfred Richard Orage that frequently published articles by Levy, Ludovici, and other English Nietzscheans in Levy's circle, as well as various modernist writers and artists including T.E. Hulme, Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, and G.K. Chesterton. Orage conceived of *The New Age* as a journal dedicated to Fabian socialism with the additional aim of bringing Nietzsche to the attention of the English public, an unusual combination of goals given Nietzsche's remarks on socialism and his association of democracy and socialism with Christianity and, by extension, nihilism (Thatcher 223).[17] However, not all readers of Nietzsche in the English context had stressed his anti-democratic dimension to the same degree that Levy

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[17] Fabian socialism is characterized by Thatcher as a democratic socialist economic system involving a militarized working class and guild system. The Fabian society in England was founded in 1884, with notable members including George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells.

and Ludovici had: certain readers of Nietzsche like Orage and George Bernard Shaw deemphasized the anti-democratic dimension of Nietzsche's thought, choosing instead to distill from his philosophy a sense of the "pressing need for change" as well as a hostility to economic Liberalism (223-224).[18] Further, directly in opposition to the type of reading that Ludovici had developed in his lectures and his expository prefaces, Orage believed that Nietzsche's thought concerning the will to power and aristocracy was not to be understood "in a gross, literal sense," and he rejected the idea that Nietzsche's thought "was a unified system," instead emphasizing Nietzsche's ambiguities (248). Nonetheless, after assuming editorial duties for *The New Age*, Orage "adopted an editorial policy which was totally non-doctrinal, and the hospitality of his columns was extended to every possible shade of political opinion, socialist and otherwise" (228). Thus, being aware of Ludovici's "passionate interest in art" and the name Ludovici had made for himself as a reader and translator of Nietzsche, Orage eventually appointed him to the staff of *The New Age* as an art critic, assigning Ludovici a reoccurring column in the paper (238).

In one such article, entitled "The Mastery of Life" (1912), Ludovici attempts to transpose his concept of nihilism to a modern English context by suggesting that that the sinking of the Titanic is symptomatic of the nihilistic aimlessness of democracy. The sinking of the Titanic was a provocative event for many modernist writers at the time because it raised questions concerning the nature of historical progress and humanity's relation to nature, as well as the question of who to blame for the catastrophe. As Ludovici saw it, the sinking of the Titanic should be attributed to the "total lack of the presbyopic vision (the ruler's vision)" and, continuing on, to "modern valuations" such as "the love of democratic speed to no great purpose,

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[18] Orage believed that only in a socialist economic reality could conditions for the realization of Nietzschean Supermen be possible. As Orage writes: "'My own view, nevertheless, is that Nietzsche and his specific problems must wait upon the economic problems that he affected to despise'" (qtd. in Thatcher 226).

democratic hedonism, democratic haste and fluster to nowhere—to nothing without goal or aim"
(112). For Ludovici, the valuative framework which he attributes to democratic nihilism—i.e., its
aimlessness or lack of goal as he characterized it in his discussion of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*—
led to the sinking of the Titanic, with Ludovici's article characteristically projecting his theories
of democratic decadence and nihilism onto the event.

While Ludovici saw the sinking of the Titanic as a significant symbol of modern
democratic nihilism—a condition which he argued in *A Defense of Aristocracy* was unleashed by
the undermining of an aristocratic framework of value during the English Civil Wars—his
modernist contemporaries interpreted the event rather differently. For instance, Ludovici's
peculiar reading of the Titanic's sinking provoked a response by G.K. Chesterton in an English
newspaper, "The Daily News and Leader," in which he dismisses Ludovici's interpretation of the
event as well as his broader philosophy to instead claim that the sinking of the *Titanic* was not
due to a "wide distribution of power, but through a personal concentration of power " (6). For
Chesterton, the Captain of the Titanic was "an extremely presbyopic person who chanced it. In
fact, he acted absolutely and exactly as Carlyle and Nietzsche and Mr. Ludovici want their
heroes and rulers to act" (6), and thus the Titanic serves as an argument in favor of democracy
because it represents an error that "only an expert could have made" (6). Joseph Conrad, by
contrast, interpreted the sinking of the Titanic as a sign of mankind's arrogant relationship with
nature while expressing a skepticism of progress understood as sheer technological or industrial
expansion. According to Conrad, the sinking of the Titanic should have a "chastening
influence…on the self-confidence of mankind" insofar as it reveals the fragility of mankind's
hubristic sense of control over nature, crystallized in the belief that the Titanic was an unsinkable
ship and the subsequent shattering of that idea (213). For Conrad, the sinking of the ship should

not be attributed to the officer of the watch for trying to avoid the iceberg, nor to the Captain who Chesterton blamed, but rather to "commercial and industrial interests" who do not try to avoid an obstacle in their way, but rather only aim to "smash at it full tilt" (219).

Ludovici's participation in this modernist negotiation of the meaning of the sinking of the Titanic, and what the implications of its sinking were for conceptions of progress, demonstrates firstly his participation in an English modernist milieu of interpretation, but secondly, it shows by way of contrast how his conception of nihilism differs from some of his other modernist contemporaries. Whereas Conrad's concept of nihilism thematizes the limits of human knowledge, agency, and progress in relation to over determining external forces, a perspective that is reflected in his interpretation of this event, Ludovici's particular concept of nihilism as rooted in the aimlessness of democratic nihilism unleashed by the English Civil Wars leads him to instead argue that the sinking of the Titanic is symptomatic of England's lack of an aristocratic framework of value. This "symptomatic" reading of the nihilism of English society is not just limited to commentary on contemporary events, however, for in his articles in *The New Age* Ludovici extends his interpretation of the Titanic's sinking to further argue that the "bloom" of early modern English nihilism, rooted in democracy and Puritanism, is further reflected in two distinct branches of aesthetic nihilism.

In his article, "Art: White Roses" (1912), Ludovici introduces some of the basic principles which inform his theory of aesthetic judgment and that allow him to diagnose the modern aesthetic nihilism of his contemporaries. The occasion for his reflection in this article, a showing at the Stafford Gallery in London, prompts Ludovici to claim that art in his time is largely symptomatic of a decadent attitude towards life. "A picture," writes Ludovici, "is a symptom," suggesting that Ludovici's method of aesthetic judgement involves the diagnoses of

an art work's underlying pathology. Ludovici's pathological approach to art here recalls his

earlier reading of Nietzsche's *The Case of Wagner*, wherein he distilled a theory of aesthetic

judgment concerned with diagnosing the morphological characteristics of a work's underlying

will. There he claimed a work could be "decadent" insofar as it reflected underlying will which

was decadent in character, i.e., that is displayed a defensive relation to power, a rejection of life,

or a kind of anarchic aimlessness, attributes which he likewise assigned to the Puritans of the

English Civil Wars.

  In this pathological approach to art criticism, Ludovici draws upon a rhetoric of vitality

and health in order to support his characterization of art's relation to different morphologies of

the will. In his article, Ludovici claims that "Art is the bloom of life," which is to say that he sees

art as a secondary phenomena informed by an underlying "root" relation to life. If Ludovici had

claimed in *A Defense of Aristocracy* that early modern English nihilism was reaching its full

"bloom" in modern England, Ludovici here suggests by way of this same metaphor that this

bloom is directly manifested in the aesthetic works which he criticizes in his articles. For

Ludovici, art's underlaying relation to the will can either be aristocratic in orientation, and so

creative, vitalistic, and healthy, or it can display a decadent, democratic, or even anarchic relation

to power which is reflected in a reactive and enervating aesthetic. Alluding to Lewis Carroll's

Alice and Wonderland, Ludovici suggests that his aim as an "artist legislator" is not to make

current art look healthier than it is, by painting a white rose red, but to address the root cause

which underlies the creation of unhealthy or decadent works of art (596). As he writes: "We are

all growing on a particular social tree whose art, i.e., whose bloom, are the inevitable outcome of

this tree's nature" and thus "the real evil lies deeper" (596).

Ludovici's method for interpreting art is therefore continuous with his earlier readings of Nietzsche's philosophy on several levels: First, that the intensity of a species' vitality at both an individual and grander evolutionary scale is shaped by specific types of moral environments, either by noble or slave moralities, was an idea Ludovici had articulated in his reading of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Further, while Ludovici's methodology might metaphorically resemble the Lutheran adage that a good tree produces good fruit and a bad tree bears bad fruit, this framework for interpretation specifically aligns with his earlier interpretations of Nietzsche. For, Ludovici's usage of terms like good and evil are not made in reference to a Christian moral framework, but rather to a Nietzschean conception of morality divided between strength and weakness, or between those who are resentful and passive in relation to power versus those who are active and creative in relation to power.

In his article "The Sonderbund Exhibition at Cologne" (1912), Ludovici elaborates further on his claim that modern art is the bloom of a "particular social tree" that is either passive, with a negative or reactive attitude towards life and so nihilistic in character, or active, and thus embodying the creative and elevating principle of the will to power. The article offers a brief genealogy of artistic movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which Ludovici casts as blooming upon the "bad tree" of democratic and Christian herd moralities. Ludovici begins with realist painters (Foucquet, Clouet, Lorrain, Turner, Constable), whom he dubs the "Transcriptionists" for their technical emphasis on light, nature and truth and which led, in turn, to the impressionism of Manet, Monet, and Renoir (348). While these movements claimed to seek the regeneration of the arts, for Ludovici they were only reactive and defensive in orientation, with Ludovici casting the realist emphasis on science to be symptomatic of the "sickness" of humanity. As Lewis writes: "Art was sick because humanity was sickening, and the

cure, if you please, consisted of copious doses of Science and Nature" (348). According to the self-proclaimed critic-diagnostician Ludovici, the realist and early impressionist response to humanity's sickness was reactive rather than regenerative insofar as it only succeeded in positing a "technical refuge from the pressing problems of the day," suggesting that an over-emphasis on technique corresponds to the attempted "circumvention" of European decadence through a reactive retreat, in turn anticipating the later "rotten" modernist styles of Cubism and Futurism (348). Following from the realists and early impressionists, Ludovici posits two opposing branches of art: The modernist art of the Futurists, on the one hand, and the art of the later impressionists, namely Van Gogh and Gaugin, on the other. What is significant to Ludovici about this branching divergence in styles is that, while he sees Cubism and Futurism as degenerative, he also sees the negative refuge of technique evolving into a more active and life affirming art in the case of Gaugin and Van Gogh, although they too ultimately fell short of developing a regenerative art capable of realizing the Nietzschean aesthetic principle of art for life's sake.

By laying out this genealogy, Ludovici further attempts to situate these aesthetic branches in relation to different theological and political trajectories, specifically characterizing the reactive branches of the aesthetic genealogy he describes as "Roundheads," a term which refers to a faction of Protestant rebels in the English Civil Wars. "The Roundheads," writes Ludovici, are "the Puritans—those who persisted in their negative attitude towards life" (348). Though his references to the English Civil Wars in this article are limited to a few scattered references, Ludovici's characterization of those who have a "negative attitude towards life" as Puritan "Roundheads" aligns with his argument in *A Defense of Aristocracy*, in which he casts the English civil as one of the essential preconditions of modern nihilism insofar as it led to the elevation and proliferation of the Puritan "archetype." Thus, while Ludovici's aesthetic

genealogy is not exclusively concerned with English art, his characterization of this aesthetic history echoes his claim in *A Defense of Aristocracy* that European nihilism is rooted first and foremost in a specifically English form of nihilism.

In opposition to the art of "the Roundheads," the Post-Impressionism of Van Gogh and Gauguin signal a positive turn away from a decadent trajectory in art, for Ludovici, as they gesture towards an alternative, more Nietzschean doctrine of "art for life's sake" (348). Ludovici thus casts a doctrine of art for art's sake and an overemphasis on form and technique as a defensive refuge merely reacting to European nihilism, whereas a doctrine of "Art for Life's sake," which Ludovici associated with the Nietzschean will to power and an aristocratic flourishing of life, is associated with more regenerative possibilities. To recall, in Wyndham Lewis's critique of his modernist contemporaries, he had insisted that the formal complexity of writers such as Joyce or Stein bely a nihilistic will to infinity, symptomatic of an overinvestment in human agency and interiority. Strikingly then, Ludovici also critiques modernist complexity or formal experimentation as nihilistic, only for the reason that it supposedly signals a defensive or reactive relation to power. In this way, these two distinct interpretations of a similar aesthetic phenomenon are colored by their markedly different conceptions of nihilism.

For Ludovici, post-Impressionism at least signals the beginning of "a healthier tone" in art, a quality which he says is not expressed at the level of philosophical concepts but rather at the level of aesthetic creation and sensory experience. That is, for Ludovici, artists don't "think," but rather they "feel," with Ludovici suggesting a correspondence between aesthetic creation and an artist's attitude towards life, be it positive or negative. For instance, according to Ludovici's interpretation, the post-Impressionists attempted to reintroduce "desirable human virtues" into their technique by drawing "nearer to life" and allowing humanity to inform the content of their

work through the representation of "human moods" and an emphasis on color and line techniques (348). Specifically, for Ludovici, the "pure colour technique" of the post Impressionists signals a simplistic mastery of expression, a control of contrasts signifies "bravery," and an emphasis on sunshine and brightness signals a more "hearty attitude towards life (348). In opposition to this interpretation of post-Impressionist painting, Ludovici claims that the technique of the Glasgow school painters, representing the "extreme limit of the opposite movement," is characterized by a "democratic blending" of color and a gloomy "Puritanical depression" (348). As Ludovici frames it then, Van Gogh's and Gaugin's technique represents an aesthetic, technical "weapon" being wielded in opposition to decadent Roundhead techniques characterized by gloominess, democratic blending of colors, and in general a negative and reactive attitude towards life, the qualities which Ludovici assigned to an early modern English nihilism, for instance in his discussion of the overly technical and drawn-out nature of Puritan church services. Thus, Ludovici characterizes the post-Impressionists as "deserters from the ranks of their old fellow-insurrectionists, the Roundheads," claiming that they instead wanted to center their work on the passions of man and the elevation of those passions (348).

Ludovici thus metaphorically superimposes competing factions of the English Civil Wars onto his genealogy of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European art, reframing conceptions of European decadence and historical decline as rooted in an English context. In this way, Ludovici likens Van Gogh and Gougin to the royalists in the English Civil War who had fought for Charles I or, as he puts it: "Like desperate Cavaliers they fought long after they knew their king had vanished" (348). However, for Ludovici, Van Gogh and Gauguin ultimately failed to overturn the aesthetic Roundheads, because in a democratic environment precluding the emergence of great individuals they were unable to find an exceptional man capable of

sufficiently inspiring and orienting their work, going so far as to suggest this was one of the main reasons for Van Gogh's suicide. Nonetheless, their work is significant to Ludovici as evidence that the "out and out Roundheads" are "wavering" in what he casts as an ongoing battle between two competing frameworks of value, one defensive and reactive in relation to life, the other regenerative, active, and creative in relation to life—a characterization which parallels the conflict between noble and herd moralities that Ludovici emphasized in his translations of Nietzsche as well as in a *A Defense of Aristocracy* in relation to Puritanism and English Parliamentarism (348). While Ludovici frames this aesthetic trajectory in terms of a metaphorical contrast between the Roundheads and the Cavaliers, there is also a more literal sense to Ludovici's characterization then, insofar as he explicitly argues for the rootedness of modern European decadence in a nihilistic aimlessness unleashed by the English Civil Wars.

Immediately followed his article on the aesthetic Roundheads, Ludovici's "Cant at the Tate Gallery" (1912), elaborates further on the idea of a decadent and unhealthy Puritan aesthetic and which in this case he links to Kant's aesthetic philosophy. The occasion for the article is a review of artwork by the American artist James Abbot McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), whose work was on display at the Tate Museum in London. The critic-diagnostician Ludovici, rarely impressed with the artists he discusses, says that his aim is to prove that Whistler's art is rooted in "a Puritanical aesthetic," a claim which he tries to substantiate by way of a discussion of Kant. While Ludovici gestures towards Kant's Protestantism as a theological link between his aesthetic philosophy and Whistler's art, going so far as to call Whistler "the painter of Kantianism," Ludovici emphasizes that Puritanism in particular should be understood as "the most negative form of Protestantism and revolutionary Christianity" (404). Additionally, Ludovici recalls that when he went to see Whistler's paintings, he felt "depressed and fatigued by their sordid lack of

health, life and colour; by their black and white austerity, like the garb of Charles the First's murderers" (404). Referring once more here to the English Civil Wars, Ludovici's associates Whistler's art with the Roundhead aesthetic described in his previous article, which was similarly characterized by its decadent lack of health and color.

For Ludovici, Whistler's art parallels Kant's philosophy at the level of aesthetic technique rather than at just a conceptual level. Whereas Kant was a "splitter of hairs in technical phraseology," writes Ludovici, Whistler is a "splitter of hairs in the matter of the greys that poured from his palette with all the luxurious profusion of a tropical Puritanism—if one can imagine such a thing" (404). Ludovici's notion of a "tropical Puritanism" here refers back to the stylistic tendency he highlighted in his previous article, characterized by an overemphasis on technique and form as well as a lack of color or else a "democratic blending" of color. Thus, as a phrase, Ludovici's notion of a "tropical Puritanism" refers specifically to the modern "bloom" of Puritanical and Parliamentary nihilism that Ludovici had associated with early modern England. In the case of Whistler, the gray shades of his art are "multiplied to infinity" with this profusion of grays, or so-called tropical Puritanism, being "symbolic of the grey, colourless individualities which democracy, with its commercial and industrial forcing-houses, has also multiplied ad infinitum" (404). For Ludovici, Whistler's art is reflective of this democratic decadence and a Puritan aesthetic because of the overemphasis on form and technique, a trait which is shared by both Puritanism and Kant's aesthetic philosophy, as well as its lack of color. As he writes: "The love revealed in these pictures in the only love that is left to the Puritan—the love of things that can be contemplated without desire or interest (of the senses), the love of things that lure one neither to life nor to any form of life" (404).[19] Ludovici thus presents Whistler's tropical

[19] In addition to this characterization of the artwork as Puritan, Ludovici paraphrases certain arguments from Kant's third critique, writing that "Kant declares that a pure judgement of taste concerning what is beautiful can be

Puritanism and Kant's aesthetic philosophy as symptomatic of a denial of life and a rejection of a Nietzschean principle of elevation, aligning this art with his conception of nihilism as it was distilled in his translator prefaces and then redeployed in *A Defense of Aristocracy*. While it is no doubt questionable to cast Kant as a Puritan, Ludovici's characterization is shaped by his overall claim that European nihilism is the secondary bloom of a specifically English form of nihilism which has led to the proliferation of an ahistorical Puritan "archetype." This formulation is thus distinct from Levy's account of nihilism, in which the English lag historically behind Europe in terms of their encounter with nihilism, with Ludovici instead insisting that it is a nihilism which is primarily English in origin and scale that promotes the Puritan archetype and which then later manifests itself in European art and philosophy.

While Ludovici argues that an early modern English nihilism has "bloomed" into this tropical Puritanism, characterized by a lifeless fixation on form and technique, he goes on to suggest that this bloom also corresponds to a second branch of aesthetic nihilism. In an article from *The New Age* entitled "Art" (1914), Ludovici expresses a critique of Jacob Epstein's "Rock Drill" while positing a theory of the relation between the plastic arts and nihilism that is distinct from his characterization of tropical Puritanism. Ludovici begins his article with the claim that when "there is no great order or scheme of life, graphic art loses its vitality," a claim which follows from Ludovici's overall position that human vitality is contingent on an aristocratically ordered society that can supply mankind with values and structure, as opposed to democratic aimlessness which leads to the situation of the "thousand and one goals" (213). In this situation, wherein there is no scheme or order to life, Ludovici says that art becomes one of two things:

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connected only with form and not with content; but, as a matter of fact, the whole of his dissertation on the subject is a continual re-statement and elaboration of this attitude," reiterating here that Kant, as a philosopher of this tropical Puritanism, stylistically reproduces this disinterested emphasis on form through his "technical phraseology" (404).

"either a medium in which new tricks of techniques are attempted for their own sake, or a means of expressing the idiosyncrasies of individuals divorced from any great vital arrangement or scheme" (213). Ludovici already described the former possibility at great length, having dubbed this overemphasis on form and technique as "tropical Puritanism," a tendency which was said to signal a defensive retreat from the situation of the thousand and one goals, i.e., the situation of nihilism. The principle of art for art's sake, for Ludovici, merely signals that there is no higher value to orient human life, and this results in a defensive and passive self-enclosed principle of aesthetic autonomy. On the other hand, in the case of Epstein, Ludovici identifies a second tendency which is nonetheless still rooted in the same nihilistic situation: In the case of Epstein, the individual retreats not into artistic form and technique, but into themselves, producing a sort of aesthetic solipsism wherein artwork is reduced to expressing only individual idiosyncrasies since one is cut off from any sense of higher values or a higher scheme of life. Ludovici reiterates this point with regards to Epstein's work, and specifically in relation to the "plastic arts": "When the plastic arts can no longer interpret the external world in the terms of a great order or scheme of life, owing to the fact that all great schemes or orders are dead, they exalt the idiosyncrasy or individual angle of the isolated ego" (214). For Ludovici, however, this aesthetic solipsism runs counter to the plastic arts, because sculpture as a medium is meant to reveal "the terms of the great order or scheme of life, shared by all" (214). Thus, when the "minor and non-value-creating ego is as isolated as he is to-day," it becomes impossible for sculpture to achieve this task, and results in the idiosyncratic particularism of Epstein's work (214-215). For Ludovici, however, this is a "purposeless individualism" which is fundamentally incapable of realizing what he takes to be the essential purpose of sculpture, and as such Ludovici casts Epstein as a "minor personality" (215).

In the issues of *The New Age* immediately following Ludovici's article, T.E. Hulme and

Wyndham Lewis responded directly to Ludovici's characterization of Epstein's aesthetic

nihilism, with Ludovici's attempt to transpose his conception of nihilism into this English

modernist context provoking another disagreement between him and his modernist

contemporaries. In "Mr. Epstein and the Critics," Hulme writes that Ludovici's book on

Nietzsche is "comical" and belies an understanding of Nietzsche which could be compared to "a

child of four in a theatre watching a tragedy based on adultery" (252). By this, Hulme means that

a child can observe external phenomena or individual moments in a play, but does not have a

proper conception of "the real structure" which unites the different parts, with Hulme here

criticizing the specific notion of unity which Ludovici had ascribed to Nietzsche's philosophy

and in relation to which he distilled his conception of nihilism (252). In this way, for Hulme,

Ludovici's rather repetitive taglines about aristocracy and the need for a principle of elevation,

corresponding to what he takes to be the overarching structure of Nietzsche's thought,

misrepresent the supposed unity of Nietzsche's philosophy. Hulme takes further objection to

Ludovici's characterization of Epstein as a minor personality, with Hulme going so far as to

threaten Ludovici with "a little personal violence" and dismissing him as a "light-weight

superman" (252). Several issues after Hulme's article, in a letter to *The New Age* entitled

"Epstein and His Critics, Or Nietzsche and His Friends," Wyndham Lewis also weighed in on

Ludovici's claims concerning the aesthetic nihilism of Epstein.[20] Offering a brief and pathos

driven invective directed at Ludovici, Lewis casts Ludovici as a "cowardly and shifty

individual," a "queer insect," and adds that Ludovici has the word "minor" on the brain because

he himself is "worth no one's while to notice" (319). In his letter, Lewis specifically demands

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[20] Lewis and Epstein had something of a working relationship, with Epstein going on to contribute several illustrations to Lewis's early Vorticist journal *BLAST*.

that someone else should be assigned to represent Nietzsche's views, asking if "some less ridiculous go-between may be found," for the simple reason that he sees Ludovici's writings on art and Nietzsche as "gibberish" (319).

While Lewis's critique is limited to these few insults, it is possible to highlight some reasons beyond just his social affiliations which may have motivated him to defend Epstein's work. In the first issue of his short-lived Vorticist journal *BLAST*, published in 1914 about five months after critiquing Ludovici, Lewis highlights the miniature sculptures of Picasso, which he admires specifically because they are "machines without a purpose" (140). For Lewis, these works of art succeed as sculptures because of their machinic lack of purpose, which more accurately reflects the reality of modernity, over and against Ludovici's demand that sculpture needs to evoke some framework of higher values or a greater scheme of life (140). Thus, just as Ludovici's and Conrad's differing conceptions of nihilism informed their distinct interpretations of the sinking of the Titanic, it can be said that Ludovici's and Lewis's different conceptions of nihilism here correspond to their interpretation of modernist sculpture: For Ludovici, the role of art and sculpture in particular is to aesthetically instantiate an existing order or scheme of life, promoting a principle of art for life's sake and a singular principle of elevation by which it is possible to overcome the situation of a thousand and one goals; Alternatively, Lewis's interest in Picasso's statues, as miniature machines without a purpose, might be said to correspond to his later characterization of the body as a dead marionette entangled in the machinic currents of existence, and the limited power and knowledge of the human in relation to this condition.

3.4   Conclusion

While Ludovici himself may have only amounted to being a "minor personality," his thought is nonetheless significant in relation to this dissertation's investigation insofar as he corresponds a third and distinct deployment of the concept of nihilism in the context of English modernism. Tracing his deployment of the concept, I claim, is therefore important for understanding the different ways in which nihilism was conceptualized in modernist debates and discussions.

As was shown, Ludovici's distillation of the concept of Nihilism derived largely from his translation and study of Nietzsche, conducted alongside his collaborator Oscar Levy, with both writers placing great emphasis on the aristocratic dimension of Nietzsche's thought. For both writers, this aristocratic dimension was crystallized in what they took to be the systemic unity of Nietzsche's thought, although this notion of unity was something that other English modernist readers of Nietzsche, like Orage and Hulme, criticized. Nonetheless, Levy's and Ludovici's emphasis on this unity was critical to their project of translating Nietzsche–both literally and figuratively–into the English context, as they wanted to situate Nietzsche's philosophy in relation to an aristocratic framework of value capable of overcoming the nihilistic situation of a thousand and one goals. Ludovici thus distilled a concept of nihilism from Nietzsche which was aligned with a situation of aimlessness, a denial of life, and a passive relation to power, qualities that he assigned to Christianity and democracy, with Ludovici and Levy both suggesting that Nietzsche's philosophy embodies the aristocratic counter principle necessary for overcoming this nihilism.

While Levy's and Ludovici's views aligned in these respects, they also differed in terms of how they characterized the origin and scale of this Christian and democratic nihilism: For

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Levy, the situation of the thousand and one goals corresponded to a principle of anarchy, which he associated with both the Reformation and the French Revolution, asserting a continuity between distinct events in European history in order to foreground the need for Nietzsche's philosophy as a solution this particular trajectory of European nihilism. In his account, Levy distinguished between a European scale of nihilism as well as a national scale of nihilism, with Levy suggesting than an English form of nihilism was inevitable although it would be encountered later in time, insofar as England lags historically behind the continent. While Ludovici likewise distinguishes between a European and national scale of nihilism, he also went on to transpose the qualities of nihilism that he distilled from his interpretation of Nietzsche to a narrower scale by placing more emphasis on an English form of nihilism—something which Levy alluded to but had cast as only secondary to European nihilism. Instead, Ludovici inverted Levy's characterization of this history, insisting on the significance of the English Civil Wars as a "turning point" wherein a Puritan archetype and a democratic framework of value took hold over England, with the bloom of this English nihilism later being reflected in European art and philosophy. Shifting his focus then to what he takes to be the modern decline of England, Ludovici characterized the realm of aesthetics as a battlefield in which an ongoing war between two frameworks of value is being carried out, with this early modern English nihilism culminating in either a so-called tropical Puritanism, characterized as a defensive retreat into technique and form, or a kind of modernist solipsism, characterized as a retreat into the idiosyncrasies and particularities of the self as a reaction to the experience of the absence of some overriding structure or sense of higher values.

Although Ludovici toggles between different scales of nihilism, just as Conrad and Lewis did, what is unique about his deployment of the concept of nihilism is the emphasis he places on

a specifically English scale of nihilism, distinct from Lewis's emphasis on a European scale of nihilism and Conrad's emphasis on a cosmic scale of nihilism. Although Ludovici suggests the possibility of a nihilism which corresponds to all of human history, by claiming that all of human history is driven by a conflict between slave and master moralities, he also goes on to argue that the English Civil Wars mark the particular historical turning point which allowed for the realization of modern English and European nihilism. Thus, for Ludovici, the realization of modern nihilism is contingent on this narrower historical context, and even his more ahistorical notion of a Puritan "archetype" is circumscribed by this English scale of nihilism, insofar as Ludovici chooses to characterize sick or decadent modalities of the will that preceded this modern nihilistic trajectory as essentially "Puritan" in character.

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To simplify, modernity can be considered as the time when to be modern is the highest value—because time is unilinear and whoever is at the forefront of temporal movement is also farther "ahead," closer to betterment, to the light of reason, according to the Enlightenment; closer to terminal collapse according to the reactionaries.

-Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism & Emancipation*

Comparing these three distinct engagements with nihilism demonstrates the formative role of the problematic of nihilism for English modernist discourse, yet in the same instance, it reveals nihilism's conceptual ambiguity throughout these discussions. Why does the concept of nihilism exhibit such variability? What accounts for the range of different interpretations? The rejection of progress, or a conception of collapse, as Vattimo puts it, is necessarily open ended in character, because to believe in progress is to presuppose an entire spatiotemporal framework of meaning. Notions of history's scale, its origin and telos, its intensity and the velocity at which it unfolds, and of the role of mankind in affecting these aspects are all bound up and presupposed by conceptions of historical progress. Thus, the dissipation of the belief in progress involves an unsettling of these various underlying categories, unleashing the array of questions of which the problematic of nihilism is comprised.

While a skepticism of progress is not particular to modernism, a modernist context of change, disruption and instability undoubtedly fostered the interrogation of traditional valuations concerning the indubitability of progress. For instance, in the context in which these writers lived, rapid technological advancement entailed, among other things, the realization of new destructive capacities, leveraged especially in the context of two global wars; new transportation technologies upended old spatiotemporal perspectives, subjecting people to new velocities, rhythms, and shocks while introducing the possibility of large-scale accidents, as in the case of the Titanic; and experiences of economic exploitation and imperialist violence elicited, at least in

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certain thinkers, a skepticism of the fictions of progress traditionally levered to support these

processes. In the first place then, the ambiguities of nihilism are manifold and multifaceted

because an unsettling of the concept of historical progress requires a reinterpretation of history's

scale, origin, telos, and velocity, as well as of the relation of man to each of these characteristics.

In this dissertation I have tried to characterize some of the specific ambiguities of

nihilism to trace, if possible, a continuity of sorts between each district deployment. One of the

first ambiguities of nihilism which I considered concerns how to properly represent the

problematic itself. That is, what is the proper genre through which the problematic can be

thought, and what generic strategies are best suited to representing this problem, or affecting its

overcoming? As was shown, Conrad engages with the concept of nihilism largely through

literature in order to explore the ambiguities of nihilism's scale and the ephemerality of language

and memory. Famously, he read a great deal philosophy, yet he wrote very little of it. Despite

Carr's suggestion then in *The Banality of Nihilism* that philosophy is the primary space in which

nihilism must be thought, Conrad would seem to disagree. For him, the space of literature and

the specific strategies available to it are most suited to representing and responding to the

problematic of nihilism and its associated ambiguities. Although he was an artist and author of

influential modernist fiction, Lewis instead chose the essay as the form through which he most

explicitly engaged with the problematic of nihilism, as its experimental and fragmentary form

better corresponds to his interpretation of human limits over and against a philosophical mode of

discourse that aims towards systematic totality and which presupposes the equation of human

conceptual schemata with the structure of being. As Lewis is concerned with the disjunction

between consciousness and the body, the limits of knowledge, and the failure of human action,

the fragmentary essay which begins *in medias res* seems more suitable for his engagement with

this problematic. Ludovici by contrast is focused on demonstrating above all the philosophical coherence of Nietzsche's thought in order to present it as a systematic totality. Ludovici's preference for a philosophical mode of engagement has to do with his attempt distill a unified and overarching system of thought and qualify his claim that it is possible to overcome nihilistic aimlessness through an embrace of a singular aim driven towards the preservation and enhancement of power, i.e., through the will to power.

A second distinguishing ambiguity of the three types of nihilism described is the different spatiotemporal scales at which nihilism can be thought. The cosmic scale of Conrad's nihilism, the European, early-modern scale of Lewis's nihilism, and the national scale of Ludovici's English nihilism are all distinct in this respect. Most broadly, Conrad imagines a cosmic scale of nihilism in his correspondence, which temporally and spatially circumscribes human history. Alongside this, he thematizes the civilizational nihilism of the knitting machine, driven by a logic of expansion and accumulation and which is more immediate to human experience as a force of domination. Conrad oscillates then between two possible scales of nihilism, one characterized by a principle of expansion and accumulation and the other by a principle of dissipation and exhaustion. Next there is Lewis's notion of a European nihilism, rooted in an early-modern error in thinking which in turn leads to the mistaken identification of reality with flux and an overinvestment in possibilities of the human will. Distinct from this, there is also the "new nihilism" of the writers of *Transition*, who likewise argue for a European scale of nihilism, only this new nihilism is said to emerge out of a break affected by the first world war, and it involves the total rejection of all morality as a result of that experience. Although Ludovici's interpretation of the problematic of nihilism moves between different scales of nihilism, his work introduces the notion of an even narrower "English" scale of nihilism which originates out of the

English Civil Wars and which fosters the spread of the Puritan "archetype." In this way, Ludovici's nihilism is much narrower in scale from the early modern European nihilism with which Lewis is concerned, and which is rooted more broadly in the reformation and its effects on Europe. Ludovici's associate, Levy, is poised between Lewis and Ludovici in this regard, insofar as he warned of the possibility of an English nihilism, but only as a consequence or secondary effect of a European nihilism. The question of scale thus marks a second ambiguity of nihilism. Yet, at the same time, each deployment of the concept of nihilism is framed according to a particular spatiotemporal scale, suggesting the close relation of problematic of nihilism to the question of the logic of history.

A third ambiguity of nihilism which shapes each author's deployment of the concept is the question of agency, which is a question concerning the limits of human power and the source of those limits, especially in relation to history. In the first place, each author discloses a degree of anxiety concerning the machinic character of modernity, whether it be in the form of Conrad's allegorical knitting machine, which is cast as an overbearing machinic will in relation to which the human being becomes but a source of energy to fuel a process of auto-destructive expansion and exhaustion, Lewis's characterization of his literary characters as "shadows of energy" and "creaking men machines" who have been reduced to puppets rather than living beings, or Ludovici's characterization of the nihilistic techniques of Puritan asceticism as the conversion of men into machines. The machinic in these cases is thus not cast as just the possibility for the enhancement or augmentation of man's power, but it also signals for these writers a threat which imposes certain limits upon human agency and which raises the question of human possibilities.

Despite the thread of anxiety which colors each author's characterization of nihilism, there are distinct differences in their interpretation of the limits imposed on human action by this

machinic modernity. In *An Outpost of Progress*, the Conradian subject that is depicted comes up against not just the machinic will of civilizational domination in the form of the knitting machine, but also the cosmic frozenness which he imagines circumscribing all human ends or frameworks of meaning, and which contains the promise of the reduction of the machine to a frozen state of nothingness. While Lewis similarly thematizes the limits of human action in his discussion of tragic failure in Shakespeare and throughout his subsequent texts, he instead equates nihilism with an overinvestment in a principle of action rather than with the limits to action that Conrad stages in his work. Lastly, while invoking a similar problematic concerning the limits of human action, Ludovici seemingly inverts Lewis's position to instead emphasize of the possibilities for human action under conditions of aristocratic domination vis-à-vis the passive nihilism of Christianity and democracy, which are both cast as herd moralities lacking a capacity for creative action.

By extension, each author's prescription for overcoming nihilism is markedly different. Conrad does not suggest an explicit path to overcoming his conception of nihilism, thought at a cosmic scale, because he goes so far as to impute a nihilistic logic to being itself, or at least he explores the ramifications of this idea in his correspondence and his short story *An Outpost of Progress*. Lewis instead gestures towards a principle of passive contemplation and a mode of aesthetic creation which is autonomous in relation to individual political ends as a counter principle to the active nihilism that he criticizes, because for him nihilism is rooted in a historically contingent moment of human history in which a mistaken belief, characterized by an overinvestment in the human will, took hold. Lastly, Ludovici posits that the path towards overcoming nihilism is to be realized through a principle of creative action, namely in the action of exceptional rulers, or else to be realized in environments of war through the collective

overpowering of an enemy as a way of overcoming a nihilism specific to national collectivities. Conrad's paralyzing skepticism, rooted in a cosmic nihilism, and Lewis's emphasis on the tragic failure of human action and a principle of passive contemplation, rooted conversely in a claim concerning the perfection of existing being, thus contrast markedly from Ludovici's romanticization of war and his emphasis on action and the power of the will, exerted at the scale of national collectivities. Despite their different framings of the problem, the three interpretations collectively underscore the significance of the negotiation of human possibilities and impossibilities in relation to historical forces for modernist discourse, once more suggesting the centrality of the question of history and man's relation to it for the problematic of nihilism.

To rephrase the original question: Why, then, does the concept of nihilism exhibit such variability, yet seemingly revolve around the same set of ambiguities? In addition to differences of genre, scale, and agency, it is notable how each writers' conception of nihilism corresponds to a distinct ontological position. When Conrad thinks nihilism at its broadest cosmic scale, his characterization of being is akin to a Schopenhauerian will to nothingness, insofar as all of human history and natural history beyond it are said to inevitably converge on a state of frozen darkness; in Lewis's interpretation, being by contrast corresponds to an existing perfection in relation to which human consciousness and the body are tragically disjunct, and in which the contemplative intellect is reserved as the sole space of human freedom; and for Ludovici, being corresponds to the will to power, to the sheer churning of power as it is driven towards its own preservation and enhancement. When these distinct conceptions are considered together, it can be concluded that nihilism's variability points in the first place to a rupture in certain conceptions of historical progress, as Vattimo suggests, but nihilism's ambiguity, I would add, further points

toward a rupture in ontological certainty, insofar as the three types of nihilism characterized in this dissertation presuppose a distinct interpretation of the question of being.

Works Cited

Vattimo, Gianni. *Nihilism & Emancipation: Ethics, Politics & Law.* Columbia University Press, 2003.