

# Friedrich Nietzsche and European Nihilism



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## FOREWORD

An author should always be suspicious of what he writes about. It is most likely that he writes about what preoccupies him—but the things that preoccupy him may very well be the things that worry him, disturb him, instil fear in him. And what he writes about may therefore very well be an attempt to exorcise the peril, to bury it under words, or at least to appropriate it to such a degree that it loses some of its alarming effects.

But there may be other reasons that the subject is imposed on him. Some people can't help but to venture into territory hazardous to them. In the same way that it is hard to keep your tongue from straying onto the damaged tooth, causing you to experience its pain time and again; in the same way that chasms and bridges may exert a fearful temptation, so the perilous subject can become irresistible to an author. Nihilism is an ideal subject for authors who know both tendencies: let the reader be warned.

The original Dutch version of this book (Nijmegen: Vantilt 2012) owed its existence to a suggestion from publisher Henk Hoeks to write a commentary to Nietzsche's famous Lenzer Heide text on European nihilism. The groundwork was laid in classes I taught on the subject at Radboud University Nijmegen (The Netherlands). Owing to an invitation from the KNAW (Royal Dutch Academy of Arts and Sciences) to work at NIAS (Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study) for a year, the class material was expanded and could be turned into a book. After having taught classes on the subject at KU Leuven (Belgium) and at the University of Stellenbosch (South Africa) and having presented parts of the material at international conferences, it proved to be worthwhile for the book to be reworked, extended and translated into English. Two MA-students from Stellenbosch, David Versteeg and Vasti Calitz, provided the translation, which was then accepted by the editors of the series "Nietzsche Now" with Cambridge Scholars Publishing. A fellowship at STIAS (Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study) offered the possibility to revise the manuscript and finalise the translation.

I would like to thank the editors of the Dutch and English publishing companies for their confidence, the students at various universities for their stimulating attention and questions, my extremely industrious translators for their assiduous work, and finally NIAS and STIAS and their



staff-members for the ideal conditions that allow a scholar to do what scholars ought to do: read, think, and write.

Nijmegen/Stellenbosch, 29 November 2017.



## INTRODUCTION

“Nihilism is standing at the gate: from where does this uncanniest of guests come to us?” (NF 2 [127] 12.125). Nietzsche often describes nihilism as something menacing, as a catastrophe. He suggests that it is something in wait for us, that it will inevitably come and have terrible consequences: “it starts with homelessness / with evil it ends” (NF 11 [335] 13.144, our transl.). At the end of the nineteenth century he writes that this gloomy but fateful event will take place in the coming two centuries (e.g. NF 11 [119] 13.57; NF 11 [411] 13.189): that means we are right in the middle of it.

This book discusses Nietzsche’s thoughts on nihilism. Here is the most prominent question: why do we not seem worried by what Nietzsche believed to be the most ominous event of all times? What did Nietzsche see or what did he believe he saw, why was it so menacing, and why do we not experience it in the same way? Was Nietzsche mistaken? Or are we deaf and blind to what is taking place?

To answer these questions, I will make use of Nietzsche’s published texts as well as his unpublished notes. A list of all the texts in which the term nihilism\* occurs is included in Appendix B. I have selected a number of Nietzsche’s most important texts on the subject which I will treat extensively: these texts are quoted in full in Appendix A. I expand on these texts in the chapters of this book and provide them with commentary. For this reason, I give attention to the philosophical, cultural and political prehistory of the term, that is to say: prior to the sense in which Nietzsche was to employ it (chapter I) and to the manner in which the thematics of nihilism arise and develop in his thought (chapter II). Most consideration is given to the interpretation of Nietzsche’s own answer to the question of where nihilism comes from and what it means (chapter III). It transpires that we have to distinguish between different types and phases of nihilism. We will also find that, instead of prematurely talking about “overcoming nihilism”, we rather have to ask ourselves in what stage of this history of nihilism we find ourselves. This approach is significantly different from the way Nietzsche’s thoughts on the subject have been interpreted and worked out by most thinkers in the past, as we will see in Chapter IV. In Chapter V we explicitly engage the question that has driven our enquiry from the start and that our findings

will have made more urgent still: what do these thoughts on nihilism have to do with *us*, and what is the reason we appear far less shocked than Nietzsche would have thought appropriate?

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE HISTORY OF NIHILISM UNTIL NIETZSCHE

Though the term “nihilism” is at present often associated with Nietzsche’s philosophy (and not without reason), its history is far older. And although it is rather Nietzsche’s use of the term than its previous history which made it “philosophically vital” (White 1987, 29), it is probably important to look at the latter for a correct understanding of the former. To understand Nietzsche’s use of the term it is likely that Russian nihilism, French literature, literary criticism, and essayistics of the 19th century will be of importance; sections 4 and 5 of this chapter cover these topics. But the history of term and concept go back much further; further even than the explicit use of the term, which we first encounter in the eighteenth century and the ensuing cultural significance the term gains in the nineteenth century. This earlier history will also provide an important clarification of Nietzsche’s understanding of nihilism in several different ways.

When Nietzsche explicitly talks about “the history of European nihilism” (in text 8 from Appendix A, for example), that is generally intended as a history of the (near) future, that is to say, “of the next two centuries” (text 9). But he is certainly aware of the fact that this history has deep roots. He points towards all sorts of moments in that previous history, which he himself, however, never fully elaborates; later authors have compiled it as a more continuous story (cf. Riedel 1978, Müller-Lauter 1984, Gillespie 1995, Weller 2011 and the literature mentioned therein). In what follows, then, I will, with the help of these authors, describe the most important lines to be drawn from this history, until the point where Nietzsche’s role begins. According to various authors, the history of nihilism starts with Christianity, although, as we will see (in § III.2 on GS 370), Nietzsche will have that phase preceded by Greek culture. In the end, the roots of nihilism are thus the very same as those of European culture writ large: Greek culture (*Griechentum*) and Christianity (*Christentum*).

## I.1 Ontology: Christianity

Although Christianity plays a crucial role in Nietzsche's interpretation of nihilism, I will not yet deal with it in this chapter. After all, we are not investigating *Nietzsche's* explanation of nihilism and Christianity's part in that here, but rather the *prehistory* of Nietzsche's interpretation. And the part Christianity plays does not coincide with what Nietzsche has to say about it. This is because a very important origin of nihilism lies in a Christian thesis that does *not* take up an important role in Nietzsche's thought at all: the thesis that God created all of reality "out of nothing": *creatio ex nihilo*.<sup>1</sup> This thesis contradicts most of what Greek philosophy took to be more or less self-evident: a thing is always born from something else, and thus no thing can ever be born out of nothing. The first formulation of this principle is generally ascribed to Parmenides, but is summarised in the Latin phrase: *ex nihilo nihil fit*.

The thesis of the creation out of nothing can indeed be called Christian, even if it appears to rely on the story of creation from the Jewish Old Testament. That is because this thesis bears on the Christian interpretation of the Jewish creation myth instead of the Jewish text as such. All we read in Genesis 1:1 is that "in the beginning God created heaven and earth". In fact, present-day exegetes say the text does not speak of "creation" at all, but rather of "separation" (Van Wolde 2009). Separation presupposes there is something to be separated, in which case there is no creation out of nothing.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it remains a thesis developed by Christian interpretation, which has subsequently played an important role in the way thought has developed. Incidentally, the expression can be found in the Old Testament, albeit in the apocryphal

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<sup>1</sup> To be clear: what *does not* play an important role in Nietzsche's thinking is the *ex nihilo* character of creation. The thought that reality is created by God and everything that goes with it (that it wouldn't exist without God, and that it can only be called good and orderly due to its being created by God) certainly does, as an object of Nietzsche's critique, play an important role: we will encounter it later on. Cf. e.g. the pastiche of the start of John's gospel in HH II MOM 22: "The most serious parody I have ever heard is the following: 'in the beginning was the madness, and the madness was, by God!, and God (divine) was the madness'". "Madness" is Hollingdale's translation of "*Unsinn*", which in Greek would be "*alogia*", the opposite of the famous "*Logos*" in the gospel-text. Moreover, cf. § III.1 and § III.2 of this book.

<sup>2</sup> As a matter of fact, this wouldn't make much difference, since it would only replace the "nothing" by "chaos": although there would not be a creation out of nothing, creation would start with separating and so creating identifiable entities out of inextricable chaos.

book of the Maccabees, 7:28: “So I urge you, my child, to look at the sky and the earth. Consider everything you see there, and realize that God made it all from nothing, just as he made the human race” (Good News Translation).

But the implications for the philosophical understanding of what was allegedly created out of nothing are far more important than the textual foundation of the thesis that it was created that way. All reality (because everything is created by God, after all) is hereby marked by a fundamental nihility. Not only *what* reality is, but even *that* it is, depends entirely on this act of creation. There would be nothing without God, nor would reality be worth “anything”; and from here the assumption that it *will not be* anything without God either is easily made. If God stops creating or caring (a type of care the Christian tradition refers to as a continual creation: *creatio continua*), or if He dies, as Nietzsche will suggest He did, reality will disappear too, will be reduced to nothing, annihilated. Reality only exists between its *creatio ex nihilo* at the start and its *annihilatio* at the end. All reality is thus dependent on something or someone that does not really belong to that reality itself, but is of another order: God, or—as we will see in the next section—his successor: the thinking or willing subject.

In this way, the thesis of a creation out of nothing introduces a fundamental (dis)qualification of reality and a fundamental distinction between this reality and something else, or perhaps between different types of reality: this, our reality, is suspended between an original nothing and an eventual nothing and is for that reason inevitably contingent and transient. This contingency separates our reality from another reality, one that is necessary and eternal. And from here it is once more but a small jump to the assumption that the changeable reality can only be understood and judged in light of that eternal reality. We are reminded of Plato’s doctrine of the Ideas, according to which visible reality is but the changeable imitation of eternal essences as they are known by the philosophers. It is not without reason that Nietzsche called Christianity “Platonism for the people” (BGE Preface, 3).

The identification of the eternal reality with a personal God is characteristic of the Christian version of the Platonic-metaphysical schema. This God has to be omnipotent, because he is the sole cause of all that exists. The interpretation of this omnipotence subsequently experiences an important radicalisation towards the end of the Middle Ages. For if God is omnipotent, he cannot be bound by anything, not even by the essences, like those said to exist in the Platonic realm of Ideas. That is why the nominalism of the late Middle Ages will claim such essences to

lack any real existence (as Platonic realism supposed they had), instead only existing as words, as names (*nomina*) with which we try and make do in our thought and speech. Of course, this places the truth-value of our own speech in a different perspective. But humankind should in any case refrain from thinking it can grasp the principles of God's creationary work: in his omnipotence, God is not bound to any principle, not even that of reason—which after all is itself created by God. God does not create according to a rational plan (for us to discover by our own reason), but out of free will. The voluntarism of the late Middle Ages stands in opposition to the rationalism of high Scholasticism. God cannot be bound to any truth or goodness or beauty which he did not himself create, meaning that he had willed it in absolute freedom.

However, this voluntaristic radicalisation of divine omnipotence runs the risk of turning into its own antithesis—as any radicalism might. For if God's arbitrariness has caused reality to contain no traces of a rationality that might explain why it is structured the way it is, then rational beings like us no longer need any knowledge of God when we try to understand the way this reality is structured. It is no coincidence that modern science is born out of this voluntaristic turn in theology and metaphysics. The consolidation of God's omnipotence paradoxically becomes an important step in the emancipation of human reason.

Manfred Riedel (1978, 377) provides us with a striking example: Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) does not start his political theory or his physics from a conception of a good and rational order, but from the opposite side: he *constructs* a scientific or political reality from chaos and loose elements. He does not think we should look for an underlying schema in order to understand reality. Instead, we should break apart and analyse the given relations and construct from these loose elements an order that works, which is to say: an order that answers to our desires. As God created out of free will, so human will becomes a guiding force in technology. Technology is thus not only an extension of, but already present at the foundation of modern science. The operation Hobbes employs to get from the reality as we encounter it to the elements from which he is able to build his own construction he calls *annihilatio*: man begins his own work of creation by first reducing creation to the nothing from which it came.<sup>3</sup> The destructiveness of later revolutionary nihilists

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Hobbes (1999), *De Corpore* part II, chapter VII, where the first few sentences mention *privatio* (privation), *ficta sublatio* (fictitious removal) and *annihilatio* (annihilation, literally: turning-into-nihility) as the most suitable manner of starting a science of nature (*doctrina naturalis*).



essentially repeats this schema (see § I.4): demolishing the given situation as a necessary preparation for the erection of a new world.

But this is too quick a jump to a period beyond the late Middle Ages and early modernity, and into a different realm than that of ontology. Before we get there, we should pursue the historic line and replace the ontological perspective with that of epistemology.

## I.2 Epistemology: modernity

Metaphysics was ontology, but became epistemology. This is a result of the development that was mentioned in the previous section: the order of being (Greek: *to on*) no longer directs the understanding of reality. Instead, we must ensure that we improve our own knowing (our *epistèmè*) and make it as pure and perspicacious as possible. Baruch de Spinoza (1632-1677) has a treatise on the purification of the intellect which precedes his metaphysics; René Descartes (1596-1650) reflects in detail on the method and rule of thought. This is necessary because the voluntaristic God gives no guarantees in respect of our knowledge; we cannot trust the created natural world to exhibit rational order nor can we trust our senses or even our intellect: an evil demon might deceive us even in our reasoning. The manner in which Descartes escapes from this problematic situation is well-known: his methodical doubting leads him to the undoubtable certainty of the *cogito ergo sum*: “I think, therefore I am”.

At this point I would only like to point out two aspects of Descartes’ discovery at the start of modernity that connect it to nihilism. *Firstly*, Descartes only gains his new certainty by negating all apparent knowledge. When he subsequently constructs an entire knowledge of the world on the foundation of this first certainty it may not be a creation out of nothing, but it is one predicated on the destruction of everything that was traditionally taken to be authoritative. The emancipation from authority remains one of the important motifs in nihilism. Nietzsche also makes this connection, when he calls Descartes the “grandfather of the Revolution” (BGE 191, 104).

*Secondly*, Descartes’ certainty at the hand of his methodical doubting ultimately relies on an act of will. The certainty of the cogito, after all, is that although I may be able to doubt everything else, I cannot doubt my doubting, at least not without thereby affirming my doubting. When I doubt, I thereby confirm myself as doubting, and therefore as thinking. But although Descartes takes *dubitatio* to be a *cogitatio*, we should acknowledge that doubting is in fact an act of will. We are thus dealing with the act by which the will conquers its own doubts by the act of

doubting and in this so doing posits itself. Gillespie (1995, 46) mentions “the will’s self-grounding act” and its “self-creation”. This sheds some light on what we already saw with Hobbes: man not only emancipates himself from the voluntaristic God and his capricious omnipotence, but he does so by placing himself in God’s position: he grounds himself, at least as a willing and thinking being, and in this sense “creates” himself. And because the outside world can subsequently only be rehabilitated from doubt by his own thinking, this creator can also become “master and possessor of nature” (*maître et possesseur de la nature*) (Descartes 2007).<sup>4</sup>

Descartes methodically doubted the reliability of the senses. But empiricism, which depends upon these very senses, likewise became possible by the very same voluntarism that led to Descartes’ rationalism. In order to simply look at nature ourselves, to experiment with her, to establish the kinds of relations we observe and the things to be accomplished in light of our knowledge of them, we surely do not require knowledge of a God that acts arbitrarily. Doubts about the reliability of such observations and knowledge do however return, for example in the scepticism of David Hume (1711-1776) and in its reworking by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant’s solution to the problem of scepticism is the final step in the *pre*history of nihilism, which is the step that introduces its explicit history.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1998, for example in B 19 and B 788) Kant recognises that Hume is right to the extent that mere observation does not present us with true knowledge. We may see all kinds of things, or rather, we may receive all kinds of impressions, but the identification of those impressions and especially the relationships between the things we see (which is what turns sensory impressions into *observation* and *knowledge*), are not so much received as constructed. Human understanding imposes certain patterns on impressions, and it is only by virtue of these patterns that we can say that we observe things and posit, for example, relationships of causality. But that means we really only have knowledge of reality to the extent that we ourselves construct it, of reality in the way it appears to beings like us; or, in Kant’s terminology: that we only have knowledge of *phenomenal* reality. Reality apart from our understanding of it, reality as it is in itself, the *Ding an sich* or *noumenal* reality, necessarily remains unknown.

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<sup>4</sup> In Part Six of his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes writes that knowledge built on a certain foundation can literally make us “*comme maîtres et possesseurs de la nature*” (“as it were, the masters and possessors of nature” (2007). In the “*comme*” (“as it were”) lies a small, but not unimportant nuance by virtue of which the religious Descartes remains at some distance of total revolution.

Many authors have taken this idealism, the thesis claiming there is no reality outside of our own thought of which we can say anything useful, as an important seed of nihilism. One of Kant's contemporaries, Daniel Jenisch, already criticises his thinking as early as 1796, calling it "transcendental-idealistic nihilism" (Riedel 1978, 380; our translation). But the nihilistic potential of Kantian thought becomes especially clear in the work of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814)—who, like Nietzsche after him, was a student at the famous Schulpforta gymnasium.

Fichte was to claim that the idea of a noumenal reality ultimately still emanates from that same thinking subject, or in Fichte's terminology, from the same "I" that constitutes phenomenal reality. *Everything* thus comes back to this "I". By discovering that all the things it might think have no reality apart from that thinking, it at the same time discovers the absolute reality of the thinking "I". This does not of course refer to my empirical "I", as distinguished from somebody else's, but to an absolute "I", that comes into existence through the reflection in which the thinking "I" distinguishes and separates itself from everything that is empirical and particular; the absolute "I" from which all empirical "I's" are abstracted and which thus stands at the foundation of all things: of the "not-I" because that is constituted through its thinking, and of the "I" itself because it posits itself in that act of thinking. The association with the voluntaristic creator-God is obvious: only this time it is not a God outside of us, but the "I" inside of us that appears as an absolute creator and *causa sui*. All reality is stripped of its independence and practically dissolves into the act of creation by that absolute "I".

If there is no reality without our own constitution thereof, then that which we constitute is not anything on its own; on its own, it is mere appearance, nothing, *nihil*. This holds for *all* reality—including the reality that religion calls "God". It is thus not completely incomprehensible that Fichte was accused of atheism. And it is against the backdrop of the fear of atheism that we must understand the reproach of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743-1819), who in a kind of open letter to Fichte (the *Sendschreiben an Fichte* from 1799) calls his manner of thought "nihilism".

Nietzsche never studied idealism after Kant and most likely read neither Fichte nor Jacobi.<sup>5</sup> But he certainly would have taken note of it, albeit in roundabout ways. One of these detours could have been *Les Misérables*, the novel by Victor Hugo (1802-1885). In the novel, nihilism is defined and criticised as a reduction of the infinite to a concept of

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Brobjer 2008.

thought.<sup>6</sup> In the time that his notes on nihilism originated Nietzsche was reading some works by and especially about Hugo, whom he never did regard very highly.<sup>7</sup>

A different, far more important and remarkable detour is the American author Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882): important because his essays were among Nietzsche's favourite literature; remarkable because of his interpretation of idealism. Emerson explicitly refers to Jacobi and Fichte in an essay about a figure whom he calls "The Transcendentalist": one who posits that in the end, all reality is a reflection of thinking. For Emerson, however, "this transfer of the world into the consciousness" (1908, 345) presents no danger, but rather a promise, an ideal of unification with the world as is also pursued in Buddhism (an association which, as we will see, Nietzsche also encounters in Schopenhauer). Emerson does not think that a complete realisation of this ideal exists and that it may even be impossible in "our" times—but those who manage to accomplish it to its furthest extent are of great importance to society. They point to that which reaches beyond the lowly interests of the times, and they are called geniuses; their existence and development is continually threatened; they will inevitably be misunderstood and are to be recognised by their loneliness and their retreat from everything that can be called useful in society. We recognise various aspects of Nietzsche's representation of the genius, the free spirit, and even the overman (*Übermensch*) in this description of the transcendentalist, who appears to be Emerson's version of the very figure Jacobi criticises for being a "nihilist".

And while Emerson does not employ the term "nihilism", it is with him that we see at least one aspect of its meaning appear in a positive sense for the first time. Emerson's text was written in 1842, just before 1848, which will be called the year of revolutions in Europe. Even though Emerson makes no connection with political revolutions, we will see that the term will be used with this positive meaning in that context especially.

Various authors have pointed out that the philosopher Fichte, by his radicalisation of idealism, unintentionally became a father of the modern revolutions, something Jacobi also suggests. In 1799, the year in which Napoleon's *coup d'état* brings an end to the French Revolution, Jacobi points out that any creation by Fichte's absolute "I" solely takes place by virtue of the negation of the independence of reality, and, in this sense, its

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Victor Hugo as cited in Weller 2011, 21ff.

<sup>7</sup> According to Nietzsche, Hugo was an example of contemporary decadence: he was to be to literature what Wagner was to be to music. Whether Nietzsche read the novel *Les Misérables* himself is not known (at least not to me). Cf. Le Rider 2006.

annihilation or destruction: “By destroying I learned to create” (“*Vernichtend lernte ich erschaffen*”: cited by Riedel 1978, 382; our translation).

### I.3 The demonic will: romanticism

Before we can further elaborate on this revolutionary form of nihilism we still need to face another, darker side (though one that will also work itself into the figure of the revolutionary): the dark side of the all-illuminating sun of the absolute I. This dark side is found in Romanticism (cf. Riedel 1978, 383-387; Gillespie 1995, Ch. IV).

The absolute “I” constitutes (“posits”) itself and eventually constitutes all reality as known reality. It posits this self-constituting or self-confirming act (Fichte calls it a *Tathandlung*) as a radically free act of will. Romanticism will place a special emphasis on this aspect, in a manner that will prove to have two remarkable implications.

Firstly, it will emphasise the negative moment we already referred to: the affirmation of the “I” takes place through the negation of a separate reality. But this negation of all independent reality leads to the enthronement of the “I” in a world of complete emptiness. It has no other, no reality to face, no communion in which to engage. There is naught but the nothingness and loneliness in which and from which the “I” creates its own world. The “I” becomes an endless egotist in a world that is eerily empty. William Lovell, from the novel bearing the same name by Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853), discovers himself to be “the only law in all of nature, the law everything obeys” but immediately concludes that: “I lose myself in a large, endless desert...” (as cited by Hillebrand 1984, 96; our transl.). The metaphors the romantic uses make it clear that his world is ruled by death, night and boredom.

In the second place, this terrifying vision reflects back onto its creator: within the world it has created, the “I” discerns its own—apparently destructive—representations and desires! The emotions of the empirical “I” (such as boredom, or terror) are not in response to an outside—there is no outside, after all—but an experience of the self-positing or self-confirming activity of the (absolute) “I”. It becomes clear that the creator isn’t the bright light of reason, but a dark force. The absolute “I” becomes a demonic power that the empirical “I” is at the mercy of. The protagonists of romantic literature all convey a certain aspect of this capitulation to the demonic: the William Lovell from Tieck’s 1795 novel has been called “the first nihilist in German literature” (Hillebrand, 1984, 95, our transl.), but he is soon accompanied by Julius from Schlegel’s *Lucinde* (1799),

Roquairol from Jean Paul's *Titan* (1800-1803), Byron's *Manfred* (1817) and many others. Goethe's *Faust* can be added to this list too, though in his case the demonic is eventually controlled and tamed by the godly: Mephistopheles is "[p]art of that force which would do evil evermore, and yet creates the good" (Goethe 1990, 159). For the real romantics, reason or self-control has no power over the demonic forces. The subject has no choice but to be swept along by the devils it has conjured up, it decays in its own immorality and is dragged along in misery; it tries to find itself by uniting itself with the demonic inside itself. To achieve this, it must of course break through the norms and conventions by which civil society upholds itself, which is how we once more approach the negativity previously encountered, and which also earned romanticism the reproach of being nihilistic.

A good example of the relationship between idealism and romanticism and the critique this relationship engenders can be found in a text by Jean Paul (1763-1825), in which he criticises his contemporaries. Moreover, his criticism reminds us of the charge of atheism already levelled against Fichte, and does so in a manner that brings to mind the way in which Nietzsche will later depict the death of God. I am alluding to the famous text in which Jean Paul evokes a nightmare: *The dead Christ proclaims that there is no God*. His intention, as he writes in his introduction, is to provide a counterbalance to the "suffocating fumes" that come from "the school of Atheistic doctrine". Indeed, "in all this wide universe there is none so utterly solitary and alone as a denier of God" (1897, 260). The accompanying horror is depicted as a dreamscape of a graveyard in which the dead leave their graves and call out to Christ, asking whether it is true that there is no God: Christ confirms this. He has fruitlessly looked for his Father everywhere and found nothing but eternal chaos. All reality, all light is swallowed by the immeasurable emptiness of an eternal night. Christ, too, is desperate and torn by this discovery, which, after all, renders not only his suffering but that of all people utterly meaningless. His shocking confession leads to a variation of the desperate words on the cross: "O Father, Father! Where is that boundless breast of thine, that I may rest upon it?" (264).

In the introduction to this dream it immediately becomes clear that Jean Paul sees a connection between atheism and the characteristics of idealism and romanticism described earlier: he says his dream is directed at the magisters trapped in critical philosophy. And it soon becomes clear that his criticism is directed at the way idealism dissolves all reality into nothingness and leaves nothing but the I. When the poet emerges from the terrible dream it transpires that both nature and a "gladsome, short-lived

world” suddenly exist once more. He supposes that atheism has caused the universe to explode into aimlessly wandering points of “I’s” (265). The omnipotence of the “I” is in despair, as a result of the emptiness it produces. This creation’s demonic character becomes clear in the desperate outcry: “Alas! If every soul be its own father and creator, why shall it not be its own destroying angel too?” (264).<sup>8</sup>

We can also find the connection between (Fichtean) idealism and romanticism in the work of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860). His main work, *The World as Will and Representation*, will leave an indelible mark on the young Nietzsche and would later become the prime example of one of the versions of nihilism he would criticise. Schopenhauer, who briefly studied under Fichte but soon became disenchanted with him, sought to develop his own method to continue Kant’s thought and its distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal world. Where Fichte still annuls this distinction by positing the noumenal world as a product of the “I” too, Schopenhauer proposed his own way of doing so. He suggests that (and in this we recognise romanticism once more) the “I” does not in fact stand at the foundation of everything, but is itself the product of an aspiring force: the will. It is not the “I” that is the absolute, the *Ding an sich*, but the will, ruling absolutely; not reason, but an irrational demonic force. This will produces the things and human beings who are each of them ruled by a blind dynamic that guarantees continual dissatisfaction: either for lacking the thing they strive after or for the boredom of already having acquired it. And in the end, all striving is futile: death destroys every success. Life is a tragedy. Deliverance is only possible on the condition—and to the extent—that the will can be denied. Only then can we escape the meaningless cycle the will continually forces us back into again (Gillespie 1995, 186-197, Riedel 1978, 399). Schopenhauer presents salvation as entering into nothingness; he refers to Buddhism’s nirvana. And though Schopenhauer does not, to the best of my knowledge, use the term “nihilism”, it is understandable that his thinking was labelled as such, even before Nietzsche did so (Müller-Lauter 1984, § 6; Gillespie 1995, 290 note 27).

Romanticism is the earliest form of opposition to modernity, an opposition that has also been labelled “modernism”. Both in philosophy as in literature this modernism will aim its criticism at modernity and its adhering values,

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<sup>8</sup> It is tempting to connect this to Nietzsche’s poem *Between Birds of Prey* (*Zwischen Raubvögeln*) in which Zarathustra’s experience of nihilism appears to be portrayed (“between two nothings / a question mark”) and where it is twice suggested that this makes the lonely knower of the self his own executioner: “*Self Thinker! Self Hangman!*” (DD, 273).

and above all at the belief it has in the power of reason. This modernity will subsequently be characterised as “nihilistic” in very different ways (progressive and “leftist” or reactionary and “rightist”) (Weller 2011, 8ff.). We thus find that both critic and criticised can be called “nihilist”, reiterating the polysemy of the term once more.

### **I.4 Revolution and the transformation of nihilism into something positive<sup>9</sup>**

Schopenhauer doesn't only assert himself in opposition to Fichte, but also in opposition to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). The latter had attempted to tame the negative parts of Fichteian idealism by integrating them into a development by which the spirit comes to realise itself. A thesis calls forth an antithesis, and they are reconciled to each other in a higher unity; a force calls forth a counterforce, by which calling a stronger force comes about: negation is but a moment in a dialectical development. But instead of curbing the demonic forces, Hegel conjures them up, at least amongst the Young Hegelians and revolutionaries, and especially in Russia.

Hegel was widely read amongst these revolutionaries. Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876) translated texts by Fichte and Hegel, Nikolay Chernyshevsky (1828-1889) and Nikolay Dobrolyubov (1836-1861) were both seminarians who became revolutionaries after reading Hegel and Feuerbach. Riedel (1978, 393) writes that for a while, “Hegelianism” and “nihilism” had more or less the same meaning.

When, as Hegel explains, negation is a moment in a development, destruction and revolution are justified. The old must be toppled for the new to become possible. Even the synthesis, in its own turn, must be negated if it does not answer to the ideal. When Tsar Alexander II (1818-1881) answered calls for renewal and liberalisation with a number of reforms, these reforms—in spite of his intentions—became the start of a radicalisation of the revolution (Siljak 2008, 34ff.). There was a growing conviction amongst many people that only a complete destruction of the old could pave the way to a new world. Improving the world starts by destroying what currently exists. For as the new is further idealised and expanded, it necessitates more destruction; and to the extent that the old is stronger and more encompassing, this destructive energy represses the

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<sup>9</sup> For this part of the history and more references to literature cf. Gillespie 1995, ch. V; Riedel 1978, 390-404; Cassedy 2004, 1638ff. For Russian nihilism, see Grillaert 2011. Other sources are explicitly mentioned in the text.



idea of the goal of the destruction as well as any mitigating effect that might flow from it. The constructive or constitutive meaning of the negation does not just bind itself to, but even threatens to be supplanted by the demonic anger at the hand of which it is occurring. The revolutionary potential, which has already shone through on a number of occasions in the development of thought, encounters the material conditions necessary for its fruition halfway through the nineteenth century (1848!).

The most important consequence this has for the development of the meaning of the term “nihilism” is that, for the first time, it is used in an affirmative sense. In both Emerson and Schopenhauer, we already came across the positive meaning afforded to themes we could link to nihilism. But now the term itself and even the destruction it points to start to have a positive ring. It should be mentioned that the term does still retain its pejorative meaning (especially by those who oppose the revolution), signifying atheism, hedonism, and egoism as the representative trademarks of an era fallen into disrepair. But it is telling that from here on, and especially in Russia, the term is no longer used exclusively as condemnation or profanity directed at others, but also as an honorary title a revolutionary can claim for him or herself: a meaning that swiftly spreads due to the manner in which it speaks to the literary imagination.<sup>10</sup>

Nihilism increasingly comes to represent the fight in which freedom seeks to realise itself, a modern stance that substitutes traditions for its own insights, a vision cast toward the future rather than the past, an experimentalism that goes hand in hand with anti-traditionalism and emancipation, and an orientation that relies on natural empirical science instead of the knowledge of history that pursues erudition: physiology instead of philology—an opposition we recognise in Nietzsche’s work too, and one he provides with his very own interpretation.<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche probably

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<sup>10</sup> Alongside of the authors and works here discussed, there are further examples of literary depictions of nihilism (though it is not clear whether or not Nietzsche read them): Karl Immermann, *Die Epigonen* (1823-1835), Ernst Willkomm, *Die Europamüden* (1838), and Karl Gutzkow (an author who in general was harshly judged by Nietzsche, in multiple texts), *Die Ritter vom Geiste* (1850/51) and *Die Nihilisten* (1853/56). Also cf. Hillebrand 1984 and Hofer 1969.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Zwart 2000; Van Tongeren 2012-a. In *Fathers and Sons*, Turgenev’s 1919 novel, (still to be discussed) the son takes Pushkin’s poems from his father’s hands and gives him Ludwig Büchner’s *Kraft und Stoff* (*Force and Matter*, 1855) instead, in which all reality is reduced to chemical and biological processes. Nietzsche actually mocks this Büchner, who he refers to as “this fanatic friend of matter” (our transl.), for example in NF 30 [20] 7.740. For Büchner’s popularity amongst Russian revolutionaries and nihilists, cf. Siljak 2008, 48ff.

encounters this positive, revolutionary, and emancipatory meaning of “nihilism” in at least two ways.<sup>12</sup>

Firstly, he must have been made familiar with the thoughts of Alexander Herzen (1812-1870) through Malwida von Meysenbug (1816-1903). Nietzsche got to know von Meysenbug in 1872 and they regularly met thereafter: they maintained an intensive correspondence until 1889.<sup>13</sup>

Malwida was a governess and teacher in Alexander Herzen’s family for some time and afterwards raised their daughter Olga like her own. According to many, Herzen, who has been called the father of Russian socialism, played an indispensable role in spreading the new, positive, emancipatory, and libertarian meaning of the term “nihilism” (Siljak 2008, 44ff.).

Secondly, and predominantly, Nietzsche came to know this positive usage of the term “nihilism” through *Fathers and Sons*, a novel by Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883), who moreover knew Herzen quite well himself. The novel appeared in 1862 and had an immense influence on both the Russian revolutionary youth as well as the ones whom they opposed (Siljak, 50ff.): Nietzsche read the French translation in 1876. The novel’s main character, Bazarov, is a nihilist. Some say he was based on Chernyshevsky and Dobrolyubov (Moss 2002, 78), while others recognise the anarchist Bakunin in his ideas (Weller 2011, 23), and about whom Herzen had already published an essay in 1869. It is with pride that his friend Arkady introduces this nihilist Bazarov to his father Nikolai and his uncle Pavel. I will cite a long passage to illustrate the two generations’ clash in manners of thinking and living:

“What exactly is your Bazarov?” he enquired of Arkady. / “What is he?” Arkady repeated smiling. “Do you really want me to tell you what he is, Uncle?” / “If you please, my nephew.” / “He is a Nihilist.” / “A what?” exclaimed Nikolai Petrovitch, while even Paul Petrovitch paused in the act of raising a knife to the edge of which there was a morsel of butter adhering. / “A Nihilist,” repeated Arkady. / “A Nihilist?” queried Nikolai Petrovitch. “I imagine that that must be a term derived from the Latin nihil or ‘nothing.’ It denotes, I presume, a man who—a man who—well, a man who declines to accept anything.” / “Or a man who declines to respect anything,” hazarded Paul Petrovitch as he re-applied himself to the butter. / “No, a man who treats things solely from the critical point of view,” corrected Arkady. / “But the two things are one and the same, are they

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Brobjer (2008, 88) who mentions only the second of these.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Nietzsche/Meysenbug 2004. For an interesting detail on the role that nihilism played in the relationship between Nietzsche and Malwida von Meysenbug cf. the following footnote as well.

not?" queried Paul Petrovitch. / "Oh no. A Nihilist is a man who declines to bow to authority, or to accept any principle on trust, however sanctified it may be." / "And to what can that lead?" asked Paul Petrovitch. / "It depends upon the individual. In one man's case, it may lead to good; in that of another, to evil." / "I see. But we elders view things differently. We folk of the older generation believe that without principles" (Paul Petrovitch pronounced the word softly, and with a French accent, whereas Arkady had pronounced it with an emphasis on the leading syllable)—"without principles it is impossible to take a single step in life, or to draw a single breath. Mais vous avez changé tout cela. God send you health and a general's rank, Messieurs Nihil—how do you pronounce it?" / "Ni-hi-lists," said Arkady distinctly. / "Quite so (formerly we had Hegelists, and now they have become Nihilists) —God send you health and a general's rank, but also let us see how you will contrive to exist in an absolute void, an airless vacuum. Pray ring the bell, brother Nikolai, for it is time for me to take my cocoa."

Turgenev 1921, 60-63

Still more resoundingly positive are Chernyshevsky, in his novel *What is to be done* (1863; cf. Siljak 2008, 56ff.), and Sergey Nechayev (1847-1882) in his *Catechism of a revolutionary* (1869; cf. Siljak 2008, 119ff.), in which a limitless commitment to destruction is professed. This Nechayev and his view of the revolutionary probably stood model for the character of Pyotr Verkhovensky in the novel *Demons* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881), which was read and admired by Nietzsche late in 1887. Nietzsche takes down citations, makes summaries and formulates his own commentaries (NF 11 [331-351] 12.141-153) during his reading of the book; it clearly makes a deep impression on him.

From these notes, it becomes clear that another character from the same book has caught his attention: Kirillov, the nihilist who kills himself to prove that God doesn't exist. Nietzsche writes multiple notes in which he tries to reconstruct the "logic of atheism" (NF 11 [331-334] 13.141-144, our transl.): Is suicide inevitable now we know that God doesn't exist? Or is it necessary in order to prove that God does not exist; or is it perhaps "the most complete way man can prove his independence"? Does the nihilist who commits suicide act in a manner consistent with his unbelief, or is he a fanatic who sacrifices everything to this unbelief, as the believer did to his religious beliefs? This is the figure—a common occurrence amongst Russian nihilists—Nietzsche may have in mind when he writes of "nihilism á la Petersburg (meaning the *belief in unbelief* even to the point of martyrdom)" (GS 347, Appendix A text 12). Kirillov's case makes it clear that atheism (of which we have seen that it is connected to nihilism from the beginning), too, gets a new role in this revolutionary

phase of the term. It becomes a part of the fight for liberation that is taking place under the banner of nihilism—and reveals its paradoxical implications.

## I.5 France and decadence

This last part in the history of the term nihilism brings us to Nietzsche, whose own understanding of the term we will receive a more detailed discussion in the following chapters. It is certainly possible to draw more lines from this history than I have done here—for such efforts I refer to the literature already cited. But there is still one aspect of this prehistory that I would like to briefly touch upon myself, in light of its immediate importance for Nietzsche: the way in which the term functioned in French culture of the nineteenth century.

In the eighteenth century Louis-Sébastien Mercier (1740-1814) already describes the nihilist (or “*rienniste*”) as a person who believes in nothing and whom nothing interests.<sup>14</sup> Mercier’s description is clearly pejorative; he criticises nihilism, which he believes harks back to Descartes and is the final consequence of atheism (Hofer 1969). But his description of the term will receive a less judgemental meaning as it works through into the nineteenth century, when the term will be employed to describe the spirit of decadence. And this decadent literature of the nineteenth century in particular had a major influence on Nietzsche’s thought.<sup>15</sup>

The young Nietzsche reads Ernest Renan intensively (1823-1892). At first he finds him useful for his criticism of David Friedrich Strauss (Nietzsche’s first *Untimely Meditation* engages his ideas), but he increasingly detects a romantic-metaphysical flight in Renan’s work, a

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Müller-Lauter 1984, § 4. Curiously, Müller-Lauter fails to mention that a similar description of nihilists already appears in St. Augustine, at least according to Malwida von Meysenbug’s *Lebensabend einer Idealistin* (which only appeared in 1898), 1922, part II, 227: “In 382 AD St. Augustine wrote: ‘*Nihilisti apellantur quia nihil credunt et nihil docent*’ (‘they were called nihilists, because they did not believe anything nor taught anything’). He spoke of a community whose goal was the negation and destruction of everything that existed. Therefore even this is nothing new, only the dynamite is a modern addition.” (our transl.)

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Campioni 2009, on which much of the rest of this paragraph relies as well. Also cf. Brobjer 2008, 88, Kuhn 1992, 42ff.; and furthermore Weller 2011, 17ff., who notes several other early (eighteenth century) mentions of the term: in J.B.L. Crevier’s theological context (*Histoire de l’université de Paris*, 1761), “nihilism” is supposedly the term for the heresy that claims Jesus’ humanity is “nothing”, and in Anacharsis Cloots’ political-theological context (*L’orateur du genre-humain*, 1791), “nihilism” would indicate *both* the non-theistic *as well as* the atheistic position of the republic of a sovereign people.

flight he is critical of. When at a later time he reads Paul Bourget (1852-1935) and Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly (1808-1889), he recognises his own criticism in their diagnosis of Renan's thought as morbid and impotent (Nietzsche appears to allude to Barbey's calling Renan a "eunuch" in GM III 26, 159). There is another description they employ: "nihilistic".

This diagnosis forms a part what draws Nietzsche to contemporary French culture: the rediscovery of the renaissance man as an example of good health, existing in the control of the multiplicity of forces that man gathers within himself on the one hand, and the articulation of decadence as the powerlessness and sickness of not being able to appropriately organise this multiplicity on the other. The first he found mostly in authors like Stendhal (Marie-Henry Beyle, 1783-1842), Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893) and Ferdinand Brunetière (1849-1906), the second predominantly in Bourget and the brothers Edmond (1822-1896) and Jules (1830-1870) de Goncourt. But these two aspects belong together, not only for the way in which the strength of the one portrays the weakness of the other and vice versa, but also because strength and weakness both emanate from the same: the entangling of multiplicity of forces, tendencies and possibilities. Similar to the (Italian) Renaissance, this modern era is also characterised by such multiplicity and mixing. The breaching of the fixed structures of the earlier medieval feudal system and the current emergence of large cities cause "race"<sup>16</sup> and rank to mix. The tension this creates, not only within society at large but within individuals too, always contains two elements. On the one hand, it can give rise to the greatness of extraordinary people, like the great rulers and artists of the Renaissance (Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci, Cesare Borgia) or more current examples like Napoleon or Byron's literary creation Manfred. On the other hand, this chaos threatens the individual, whose natural inclination is to protect itself from this threat by escaping into religion, intoxication, or the masses.

"Nihilism" (alongside "aestheticism", "dilettantism", and sometimes "naturalism" and "romanticism" too) is one of the terms that signifies this last-mentioned aspect of modern man and culture. The metropolis, and Paris in particular, is the laboratory in which this typical illness of the times can be studied. French literature and literary criticism, discussing Russian literature too (like Brunetière's *Le Roman naturaliste*, published

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<sup>16</sup> The term "race" is here used in the very broad range of meaning attributed to it in the early nineteenth century. For an extensive study on this usage, cf. Schank 2000, as well as the upcoming § II.3.

in 1883 and republished in 1884, when it was read by Nietzsche<sup>17</sup>), the emerging French psychiatry (Théodore-Armand Ribot, 1839-1916, Charles Féré, 1857-1907<sup>18</sup>) and Bourget's *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (1883, read by Nietzsche in that year) as well as his *Nouveaux essais de psychologie contemporaine* (1885, read by Nietzsche from that year onward) are some examples of the manner in which Nietzsche takes note of the results of this enterprise.

But Russian literature, in which a related diagnosis is discovered, is also swiftly translated into French and absorbed within the delineated framework. Nietzsche reads both Dostoyevsky (a version of *Notes from the Underground* and *Demons*, amongst others), Tolstoy (*Ma Religion* or *What I Believe*), as well as Turgenev (*Fathers and Sons*) in French translation. He reads this last book after finding a strong recommendation in *Lettres à une inconnue* by Prosper Mérimée (1803-1870), a friend of Stendhal's. Both in French and Russian literature Nietzsche reads that "nihilism" no longer denotes only condemnation, but rather at the same time presents a diagnosis of a fascinating condition and which is further recognised by the critic as present within himself. It is exactly these self-critical aspects exhibited by the French literature on nihilism that will play an important role in Nietzsche's own elaboration of the concept.

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<sup>17</sup> Brunetière writes about Chernyshevsky's book *What Is to Be Done?* in his essay on *Le Roman du nihilisme russe* (1883, 29-50). He calls it a book that "is only of moderate importance as a work of art, but that deserves to be known as an expression of Russian radicalism" (30, our transl.). He concludes that the author shows Turgenev's sketch of nihilists in his *Fathers and Sons* was justified. Brobjer (2008, 168) mentions that "Nietzsche possessed his [Brunetière's] *Le roman naturaliste* (Paris 1884 [sic]) and had fairly heavily annotated the chapter 'Le roman du nihilisme', 29-50, in it".

<sup>18</sup> For the significance of these psychiatrists to Nietzsche cf. Cowan 2005, 48, note 1, and Hermens 2015.